Identity, language and power dynamics in online exchange

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This presentation

- Identity in online exchange and language learning
- Context of this study – the Soliya Connect Program
- Research questions and methodology
- How do participants construct identities, affiliations and disaffiliations?
- How do identities impact participation?
- How do the pedagogic model and design of space influence identity construction?
- Participants’ personal reflections
Teach English at the Department of Political Science, University of Padova, Italy.
Bilingual, ‘biculural’ models and learner identities
Aims to:

• Establish a deeper understanding for the perspectives of others around the world on important socio-political issues and why they feel the way they do;
• Develop “21st Century Skills” such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and media literacy skills.
This research study

- How do participants construct identities, affiliations and disaffiliations through interaction?
- What effect do these identities have on participation?
- How do the pedagogic model and the design of the online space influence identity construction in this situated learning context?

Research method: Membership Categorization Analysis and multimodal analysis
Dataset: video recordings and text transcripts of 7 sessions of Soliya Connect Program; diaries and final papers
Support: Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis
MCA, which is considered a strand of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis identity is seen as being constructed by participants as they engage in interaction and display or ascribe to membership of what Sacks (1992 in Antaki and Widdicombe) has called categories, which have associated characteristics or features.

It is participants who do identity work, not analysts, it is they who ‘orient to’ something as live or operative, without necessarily naming it out loud.

For a person to ‘have an identity’ – whether he or she is the person speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken about is to be cast into a category with associated characteristics or features;

The force of ‘having an identity’ is in its consequentiality in the interaction;

(Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, Identities in Talk)
Zimmerman’s (1998) makes a distinction between situational identities, discourse identities and transportable identities.

- **Situational identity** (context specific, institutional): facilitators and participants in Soliya

- **Discourse identity** (assumed in sequentially organized activities): eg. Speaker-listener, questioner-respondent

- **Transportable identity** (travels across situations): a visible identity which is “assignable or claimable on the basis of physical or culturally based insignia which furnish the intersubjective basis for categorization”.

Situational and transportable identities
Facilitator identities

- **Transportable identities**: both female, one European, other Middle-Eastern – wearing veil, visible Muslim symbol – not often made relevant in sessions

- **Discourse identities – support situational identity**: greeter, organiser of activities, organiser of turns, questioner, elicitor of questions, transcriber, summariser, prober, encourager
FacM: •Why they decided to participate in the program.?
FacW: what are you hoping to gain from it
FacW: Jack - see other people's viewpoints
FacW: Jack: more personal insight
FacW: that's great! Thanks

FacW: What do you expect to gain from Soliya?
FacW: Alef_ same as Jack
FacW: heard from classmate
FacW: excited about this opportunity to talk about issues that all humans share
FacW: like religion, politics,
FacW: exciting to meet others from other parts of the world
FacW: and what they think of me, my country and people
FacW: Thanks Alef
FacW: FacM: let’s hear more from our ladies
FacW: :-)  
FacW: Deni: taking a class at uni of maryland  
FacW: prof wanted 5 volunteers  
FacW: Class is about intercultural dialogue  
FacW: with Arab world  

...  
FacW: Fadela: suggested by the teacher  
FacW: F: will graduate this semester  
FacW: hopefully will get to know more people this semester  

FacW: ok guess we could have a male?  
FacW: to talk now I mean  
FacW: Brendan: also suggested by teacher  
FacW: to get opinions from other people  
FacW: clas is Middle East and media
Participant identities

- Discourse identities (e.g., responding to facilitator questions or tasks) reflect situational identities, i.e., participants.
- Participants produce talk that aligns them with other participants - shared membership categories (affiliation with Soliya).
- Different aspects of participants' transportable identities are made relevant in interactions by facilitators and participants.
- Identities can empower (or disempower) participants and foster (or hinder) participation in discussions.
FacW: Thamena: I don’t thin the Americans weill help us
FacW: Thamena: they made the situation worse in Iraq

FacW: Alef _ I do agree with you Thamena
FacW: the kind of help in Iraq wasn’t what the Iraqis needed
FacW: but in Tunisia and Egypt
FacW: they are not going to help with militatry force
FacW: but food medical help, logistics

..........  
Alef: com on  JACK :D
FacW: slowly please :-)
FacW: Jack: I don’t exactly think the US did everything right
obviously
FacW: the proper way
FacW: Jack: don’t know what to say
FacW: I don’t know what exactly we are supposed to do
FacW: I’m on the other side, the outside looking in
FacW: so it’s hard for me to say
FacW: it’s hard to speak about teh government with teh cat
FacW: in front of the computer
FacW: quick round
FacW: of what liked or didn't like about program,
FacW: then final activity

FacW: Jack: liked hearing everyone's opinion
FacW: and haven't felt personally victimised by anyone in
the group
FacW: something I personally was paranoid about was
that I was going to be the American
FacW: and the bad guy
FacW: but nobody made me feel like that
FacW: I've missed people when they haven't been here
FacW: and actually hearing about stuff that is not a
popular issue here
FacW: like the Palestine/Israel question

Extract from session 7
‘Non-native speaker’ identities

FacW: how do you feel about using English as a language in this program
FacW: and for video project
FacW: are you happy with it?
FacW: Mohammed: found it difficult at times, but facs made it easier :)
...
FacW: Fadela: feels comfortable speaking English
FacW: after session will go home and continue speaking English - right?
FacW: is happy about using English

Extract from session 7
My paper is a reflection. I want to explain how Soliya prompted me to flush out the stereotypes that prevented me to practice my work with more respect for the foreign people I meet.

I am a police woman, I love my job because I can help people.

The most important thing for the work I do is to be impartial, to work without prejudices, respecting everyone regardless of race, religion or social status.

I am a believer, my religion taught me the love for neighbor, for the enemy and for the last.

Despite the principles that I have since I was born, some time ago I discovered I also had a little form of racism. Several incidents have helped me to arrive at this result.
I was at this point of my work experience when Soliya came into my life.

Two things united Soliya to my life and to my work: my difficulty with English language and my dislike to the non-European people of the last period.

The first session of Soliya was strong. American, French, Tunisians and Moroccans, were all in the same chat room and all spoke the same incomprehensible language!

When I closed the first chat, I decided to drop out. But nothing is random and if Soliya had entered in my life there had to be a reason.

So the second meeting arrived, and with it the consideration that in front of me there was an opportunity to be seized: to know my "enemies" in their own home, in their country; I could better understand their personality and maybe improve my way to work.
My experience with Soliya continued, at the beginning it was to be just an experience to improve the way I work and my English language. I now realize that this experience has changed me.

So, I arrived at the end of the program, meeting after meeting awareness has grown: we are really all brothers, with our weakness, our ideas, our ideals, sentiments and fragility.

I have certainly to thank my fellow travelers because they dug inside my heart, so I could discover and crush that small part of racism that kept me from living completely tolerance. I think the school plays its role when it manages to transmit not only knowledge but also to look from a different perspective at things.
Impact of pedagogic design and IT interface

- Not designed for EFL, English learners did not position themselves as learners
- Activities were designed to call different aspects of identity into play
- Facilitators were trained to make use of identities
- Facilitators sought to address power imbalances
- Video/audio makes aspects of transportable identities salient
Any questions?

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