

Unit A7

Talk and identity

PROLOGUE AND ROADMAP

The Orkneys are a group of islands lying off the northern tip of Scotland where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean meet. In the sea around the Orkneys, seals are very common – their heads bobbing above the waves, watching inquisitively with uncannily human eyes. Seals, or the selkie-folk as they are known in the Orkneys, have become an important part of Orcadian folklore, and there are many stories about selkies transforming into people. In many such stories an Orcadian girl falls in love with a stranger, whom she later discovers is in fact a selkie. One of Orkney's best-known and most haunting ballads, *The Great Selkie o' Suleskerry*, is in the form of a dialogue between a mother and a selkie, who had fathered her child when he had taken the shape of a man. The shapeshifter explains:

I am a man upon the land;
 I am a selkie on the sea,
 and when I'm far frae ev'ry strand,
 my dwelling is in Sule Skerry.

It is perhaps remarkable that the man who walks on land and fathered the child is the same as the selkie who swims in the sea. Clearly something has changed but something has remained the same, and this same-but-not-the-same is the paradox at the heart of identity. *Webster's third new international dictionary* alludes to this paradox in defining 'identity' as 'sameness of essential or generic character in different examples or instances.' What we will investigate in this unit is how uses of language in different situations and activities with different interlocutors construct different facets of an identity that we perceive as essentially the same. Our first task will be to define the word 'identity' by presenting four characteristics of persons that are different aspects of person-hood. We will then go on to examine how identity is constructed in social interaction, first by looking at the work that individuals do in order to claim an identity for ourselves, and then by investigating the work that other people do to construct our identity by what they say to us and what they tell people about us. Finally, there is almost always a moment of negotiation between ourselves and others when we work to resolve disagreements about our identity.

We focus on identity as constructed by the self and others, but we should not delude ourselves into believing that free individual agency is all that there is in identity

construction. Some identities are imposed by powerful others and are coercively applied through political, economic, and educational systems, and those identities are very hard to disavow. Even so, all identities, even those coercively applied, involve lifestyles, and those people who have greater freedom in defining themselves sometimes choose to ‘cross’ into the identities of others in order to perform a new and unexpected lifestyle.

A7.1 DEFINING ‘IDENTITY’

The sense that we have of our identity and the identity of other people is a sense that seems at times confusing. If we have known a person for a long time and interacted with that person in many different contexts, we feel that although this is always the same person, sometimes they seem to be different, and we remark on this by saying things like ‘You were acting weird last night,’ ‘You’re so nice to her, why can’t you be nicer to me?’ or ‘When I first knew him, he had a very strong accent, but now I hardly notice it.’ Identity, then, has two contradictory meanings. In one sense it is the stable sense of self-hood attached to a physical body which, although it changes over time, is somehow the same; in a second sense, it refers to what we *do* in a particular context, and of course we do different things in different contexts. The first sense of identity helps us to distinguish one person from another, even two people with the same name. My telephone directory has two listings for ‘Jennifer Hamilton,’ but I don’t expect that this is the same person with two different telephone numbers. Although this sense of identity helps us to distinguish among individuals, individuality may be more important in some cultures than in others. In some cultures, individuals value their unique identity by wearing different clothes, by speaking differently, and by competing in order to distinguish themselves from others. In other cultures, it is more valued *not* to distinguish yourself from others, to wear the same clothes, to talk in similar ways, and to work as part of a team.



Task A7.1.1

- When we meet people for the first time, we often try to make sense of our experience by putting them into categories, and these categories help us to distinguish them from other people. Figure A7.1 shows some pictures of people you probably don’t know. Write down your description of the people in these pictures. What categories do you use to describe them? Then compare your descriptions with those made by someone else.

When we identify people in this way, we tend to put them in categories. For example, you probably described the people in Figure A7.1 in terms of the categories of gender, race or ethnicity, age, and profession. You may also have mentioned categories like religion, physical ability, nation of origin, sexual orientation, and so on. These are the kind of categories that you find on census forms, and these are aspects of a person that Karen Tracy (2002) called *master identities*, which she



Figure A7.1 Who are these people? Source: Downloaded from iStockphoto, File Numbers: 2192770, 2857064, 3169937, and 2903632

defined as ‘those aspects of personhood that are relatively stable and unchanging’ (p. 18). Because they are stable, many people may think they know what these categories represent, but often those representations are contested. For example, Queen Elizabeth I attempted to disabuse the French ambassador of his understanding of her gender when she said, ‘Though the sex to which I belong is considered weak . . . you will nevertheless find me a rock that bends to no wind.’

Master identities are indexed by Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*. *Habitus* refers to socially acquired predispositions, tendencies, propensities, or inclinations, which are revealed in many ways, including ways of talking. In Unit A2, we gave an example of *habitus* as a person’s accent, and it is accent that contributes much to the master identity of individuals by allowing us to categorize a person’s national origin or ethnic identity.

Task A7.1.2



- Listen to recordings of three people reading the ‘Please call Stella’ passage below. The recordings are archived on the web at *The speech accent archive* maintained by Steven H. Weinberger at George Mason University. What master identities do you assign to the speakers? Now make an audio-recording in which you read the same passage, and then compare your recording with one made by another

person. What features of voice allow listeners to identify the speaker and distinguish one speaker from another?

- <http://accent.gmu.edu/searchsaa.php?function=detail&speakerid=191>
- <http://accent.gmu.edu/searchsaa.php?function=detail&speakerid=260>
- <http://accent.gmu.edu/searchsaa.php?function=detail&speakerid=323>

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

The features of master identity such as gender, ethnicity, age, and nationality are stable, but there are other stable aspects of identity that are more often contested. These aspects are exemplified in descriptions of characters in literature taken from SparkNotes Online Study Guides.¹

Old, fat, lazy, selfish, dishonest, corrupt, thieving, manipulative, boastful, and lecherous, Falstaff is, despite his many negative qualities, perhaps the most popular of all of Shakespeare's comic characters.

Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle's scheming and disgust for his mother's sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

Kitty is sensitive and perhaps a bit overprotected, shocked by some of the crude realities of life, as we see in her horrified response to Levin's private diaries. But despite her indifference to intellectual matters, Kitty displays great courage and compassion in the face of death when caring for Levin's dying brother Nikolai.

Hester is passionate but also strong – she endures years of shame and scorn. She equals both her husband and her lover in her intelligence and thoughtfulness. Her alienation puts her in the position to make acute observations about her community, particularly about its treatment of women.

The features of identity that are described in these four quotes, Tracy (2002) called *personal identities*, by which she meant the kinds of identities that are attributed to people on the basis of their attitudes and behavior toward some issue and also those aspects of people that index the way they talk and usually conduct themselves. Hamlet's 'disgust for his mother's sexuality' and Hester's 'acute observations about . . . treatment of women' are examples of personal identities based on the character's behavior toward some issue. Falstaff's personal identity is characterized as 'selfish, dishonest, corrupt, thieving, manipulative, boastful, and lecherous' on the basis of the way that he normally talks and his routine behavior. In contrast to master

identities, personal identities involve other people creating an identity for someone on the basis of how they perceive that person to talk and behave. This creation of an identity for someone else has been termed *altercasting* by social psychologists such as McCall and Simmons (1978). Personal identities are, of course, not only altercast by others but claimed by ourselves, and often these two constructions of identity may be in conflict. If, like Falstaff, you are altercast as selfish, dishonest, corrupt, and so on, you would likely contest this identity, just as Kitty may have rejected being altercast as overprotected and shocked by some of the crude realities of life.

We mentioned earlier that the uniqueness of individuals may be important in some cultures, and it is aspects of personal identity that contribute most saliently to distinctions between individuals. Master identities, on the other hand, are social categories that construct an individual as belonging to a group, whose members all share the same master identity. If people talk frequently about aspects of personal identity, their talk may indicate that they attend to and value individual differences.

While master and personal identities are considered to be fairly stable, there are other aspects of identity that are more dynamic and situated in specific interactions. Karen Tracy refers to these as *interactional identity* and *relational identity*. Interactional identities are specific roles that people take on in interaction with specific other people. For instance, Joey is my next-door neighbor, he is my friend Dan's oldest child, he works for Gumby's Pizza, he is friends with my daughter Jenni, and he shares an apartment with some buddies from high school. His identities in interaction with other people are: next-door neighbor in interaction with me, son in interaction with his father, employee in interaction with his boss at work, and roommate in interaction with the people he lives with. The way that Joey talks in these different interactional identities is likely to differ: What he talks about (his register), his modes of meaning, his choice and sequencing of speech acts, the way that turn-taking is organized, and the trajectories of repair are all likely to create participation frameworks that differ from one interactional identity to another.

The role that a person plays in interaction with another person, as neighbor, son, roommate, and so on does not *determine* the kind of interaction that occurs. Joey is not an automaton and he can decide the kind of role that he wishes to play in each interaction, although those interactional roles are likely to be related to his interactional identity. The agency that an individual exerts in creating an identity in a particular conversation is an effort to create what Tracy calls a *relational identity*, which she defines as 'the kind of relationship that a person enacts with a particular conversational partner in a specific situation' and she remarks that 'relational identities are negotiated from moment to moment and are highly variable' (p. 19).

In previous units we have studied several examples of people who attempt to create relational identities with specific conversational partners. In Unit C2, we met Philip, the young man from the North End of Boston who told us how he creates a certain relational identity when he's in a club 'talkin' to a babe,' which is a very different relational identity from the one that he creates when he is talking to a guy. Even with the same conversational partner, relational identities can change over the course of

a conversation, as we saw in the story in Unit A4 told by a middle-class Boston woman who drove down South with her boyfriend to meet his family. By the time they reached their destination, the woman's relational identity with her boyfriend had changed dramatically, and she decided that she 'was not gonna have little Southern babies who talked like that,' and she got on a plane home. These two examples reveal that people use strategies to create relational identities in conversations, like Philip's Italian accent when chatting up women and his bravado when confronting men, but these strategies are not always successful because identities are co-constructed by conversational partners. An example of failure to construct a relational identity is the conversation between the Black graduate student and the family in the low-income inner-city neighborhood that we studied in Task A2.1.4.2. In that conversation, the husband tried to altercast the student as a 'brother,' but the student rejected the relational identity, a strategy that he later regretted when he reported that his interview with the wife was 'stiff and quite unsatisfactory.'

We have identified at least four ways in which identities can be conceptualized: as master identities, as personal identities, as interactional identities, and as relational identities. Identity is thus a complicated notion. We have seen that some identities are stable, while others are dynamic and change with the context of interaction; and some identities result from individuals belonging to a social group while others are personal, and we like to feel that they are unique to a particular personality. We have observed that individuals do interactional work to create some aspects of their own identity, but that their conversational partners also do interactional work to altercast the identity of the individuals with whom they interact. Identity is co-constructed in this way, just as Jacoby and Ochs (1995) described. In the following sections, we will discuss ways in which individuals construct their own identities, how others altercast identities, and how identities are co-constructed through talk. The relationships among the four different aspects of identity that we have presented are summarized by Tracy in Figure A7.2.

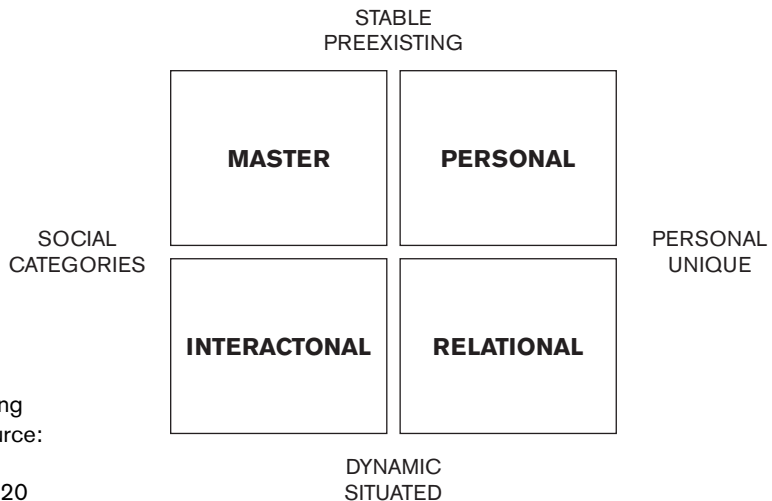


Figure A7.2
Conceptualizing
identities. Source:
Tracy (2002),
Figure 1.2, p. 20

A7.2 HOW DO INDIVIDUALS CONSTRUCT THEIR OWN IDENTITY?

In this section, we will discuss interactional work that individuals do in order to construct their own identity, and the emphasis will be on identities actively produced – whether through deliberate, strategic manipulation, or through out-of-awareness practices. Consider, first, some aspects of master identities such as age, gender, ethnicity, and national origin. In many developed societies, individuals are categorized according to different stages in the life cycle. Shakespeare wrote a soliloquy for a melancholy Jaques in *As you like it* in which Jaques categorized ‘The Seven Ages of Man’ (he didn’t include women) as Infant, Schoolboy, Lover, Soldier, Justice, Pantaloon (a foolish old man), and Second Childhood. In contemporary societies, at least five ages seem to be culturally distinguishable by the ways in which individuals use language: infancy, childhood, the teenage years, adulthood, and old age. Task A7.2.1 shows an example of how two individuals use language to create their age identity.

Task A7.2.1



- Here is an imaginary instant-message interaction between two individuals.² What age category do they belong in? How do they create that master identity?

Juliet: romeo u there

Romeo: yo wassup

Juliet: nothin, u?

Romeo: school sucked 2day

Juliet: heard wylander got mad at u

Romeo: what a jerk I usedd purple ink on the sci test, he g5ot pissed he looks like jiminy cricket

Juliet: lol

Romeo: going to nicks party

Juliet: cant im grounded

A lot of research in the past fifty years has focused on gender differences in language. One of the best known researchers is Deborah Tannen, who described differences that she observed between men’s and women’s talk-in-interaction. In her videotaped lecture, *He said, she said*, Tannen showed that females and males orient their bodies to each other differently in same-sex conversations: Females face each other and prefer a direct gaze and keep looking at each other the whole time that they are talking to each other, while males sit either at angles or with their bodies parallel and rarely gaze directly at each other. She also mentioned a number of different conversational styles that help to create a gendered identity, including a male preference for directness and a female preference for indirectness, a male preference for public talk contrasting with a female preference for talk in private, and preference by males for ritual opposition in interaction which contrasts with avoidance of opposition by females. Tannen’s descriptions of gender differences in

talk-in-interaction should not be taken to reinforce stereotypes about the ways that men and women talk, but ignoring them risks one kind of conversational style being labeled as ‘wrong’ or ‘bad.’ Although gender is considered an aspect of master identity, there is no one-to-one correspondence between gender and a particular conversational style. Many other factors influence conversational styles including regional background, social class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, profession, and individual personality.

As we have seen in the previous discussion of accent as an index of regional origin and social class, a master identity implies that a person belongs to a certain social group. When membership in a social group is well defined, the linguistic and interactional indices of membership may be highly restricted or even unique. This is the case of language varieties such as *Polari*, a form of argot³ used in the gay subculture in Britain during periods when homosexual activity was illegal. This language variety was used to disguise forbidden activity while at the same time acting as a badge of membership in the gay community. *Polari* (sometimes called *Palare*) used English grammar and common English vocabulary, but was identified by use of certain words that were unique, as can be seen in this excerpt from Peter Burton’s *Parallel lives*.

As feely ommes . . . we would zhoosh our riah, powder our eeks, climb into our bona new drag, don our batts and troll off to some bona bijou bar. In the bar we would stand around with our sisters, vada the bona cartes on the butch omme ajax who, if we fluttered our ogle riahs at him sweetly, might just troll over to offer a light for the unlit vogue clenched between our teeth.⁴

The above examples of teenage talk, gendered interaction, and gay men’s argot are linguistic and interactional resources that individuals can employ in order to create an identity for themselves. It is important to note, however, that they are *resources* and not constraints on individuals. Teenagers don’t always speak like Romeo and Juliet even when they I.M., women and men are not obliged to interact in the gendered ways that Tannen described, and you couldn’t always identify gay men in the London of the 1950s by their use of *Polari*. As Bourdieu observed when theorizing habitus, these ways of speaking index certain identities, but when they reach the level of an individual’s conscious awareness, they become resources that the individual can use at will, resources that permit an individual agent to attempt to construct a desired identity in specific interactions. And these attempts do not always succeed because other people with whom we interact co-construct our identity.

A7.3 HOW DO OTHERS ALTERCAST AN INDIVIDUAL’S IDENTITY?

Work on identity construction is never a one-person job. The way that we think about the people we know is not necessarily the same as the way that they would

wish us to regard them, but we don't keep our attitudes to ourselves. We help to create the identity of others by altercasting: by employing naming practices, honorifics, by telling stories about them, and finally (when they no longer have an opportunity to contest our construction of their identity), by writing their obituary.

One of the most common ways of using language to altercast identity is by naming a person. We all have the names that we were given by our parents that appear on our birth certificates, but these are often not the names by which other people name us. People with whom we have different relationships address us differently and, as our relationships with them change, they may change the way that they address us.

Task A7.3.1



- Imagine calling these people up on the phone and identifying yourself. How do you name yourself . . . to your parents? To your friends? To your teachers? To your best friend? To your partner? How do these people name you? Has your name changed over time?

In many languages, naming practices reflect the relationship between individuals in a systematic way. Here are two examples. As a young university professor who had just received his Ph.D., I was used to being called by my first name by most people I knew at university, so I was quite taken aback when my students started calling me 'Professor,' which is the standard term of address for anybody who teaches at an American university. I soon realized, however, that my students were altercasting me in a different identity to the one I was used to. Another example of the power of naming began in the early days of the women's liberation movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, people who wanted to change the subordinate status of women in society abandoned addressing women as 'Miss' or 'Mrs' So-and-so and began using 'Ms' instead because Ms (pronounced MIZ) is a form of address for females that does not reflect their marital status. In 1971, the term became the title of the first national feminist monthly, *Ms* magazine, which gained extensive media attention and introduced this form of address to a wider public. Although Ms is intended as a neutral counterpart to Mr, it creates identities for those women who are addressed in this way. As Margot Mifflin (2000) wrote,

Ms. is larded with sticky, often contradictory associations. For example, a 1998 survey of 10,000 Midwesterners revealed that women who use Ms. were perceived as better educated and more independent, outspoken and self-confident than those who use Mrs. or Miss. But they were also presumed by the respondents to be less attractive and less likely to be effective wives and mothers.

A very common way in many languages of indicating relative status of the speaker and addressee is to use different address pronouns. In French, you must choose whether to address someone as *tu* or as *vous*, in Spanish as *tú* or *usted*, in German

as *du* or *Sie*, and your choice of pronoun influences the form of the verb that follows. Linguists refer to the binary distinction in these languages by the initials of the pronouns of address in French as *T/V*. In Japanese, Korean, and many other languages, the resources for indexing status differences are more extensive than the binary *T/V* distinction; these resources, called ‘honorifics,’ influence not only how you address someone but also how you refer to them in the third person. The use of *T/V* forms and honorifics constructs social scales of respect, familiarity, and relative status that are important and specific to a culture which learners of the language often find it difficult to accept. For instance, the way that age creates high status in many cultures and the ways that status is indexed by use of *T/V* pronouns or honorifics is a linguistic and cultural lesson that many foreigners find it hard to learn.

When another person uses names to insult us, a children’s saying gives the victim some encouragement: ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.’ The cheerful view of naming practices in this saying, however, underestimates the power that others have to altercast us by their use of language. At the opposite end of the spectrum to the children’s rhyme is a ballad written by Shel Silverstein and sung by Johnny Cash about ‘A Boy Named Sue.’ Here is the first verse. You can easily find the remaining verses on the internet.

My daddy left home when I was three
And he didn’t leave much to Ma and me
Just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze.
Now, I don’t blame him cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that he ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me ‘Sue.’

Being called Sue caused many problems for the song’s male protagonist. As Johnny Cash tells it, ‘Some gal would giggle and I’d get red / And some guy’d laugh and I’d bust his head, / I tell ya, life ain’t easy for a boy named “Sue.”’ The altercasting of a gender identity different from the gender that a child is born into is not just the stuff of country-and-western ballads. In his research on disruptive behavior in a large Florida school district in the school years 1996 through 2000, David Figlio (2005) found that boys with names like Taylor, Dominique, or Alexis that are more commonly given to girls were more prone to be suspended from high school for disruptive behavior than boys with conventionally ‘masculine’ names.

The examples that we have examined so far show that individuals can resist altercast identities and that the creation of personal identity is a process of co-construction. This happens in all cases except one – when the self has no opportunity to negotiate identity because it is dead. An obituary is the final moment of altercasting, and is in fact a way in which others will remember us. Here are two obituaries that create memorable identities retold by Marilyn Johnson in her book *The dead beat: Lost souls, lucky stiffs, and the perverse pleasure of obituaries* (2006). The first identifies a priest’s feisty old housekeeper by recalling aspects of the interactional identity that she took on in relation to other people.

Clementine Werfel blessed priests at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Strongsville with heavenly desserts, memorable meals and seemingly miraculous coffee. The retired parish housekeeper, who died Aug. 2 at 96, routinely walked around the dining table in the rectory, offering coffee to each priest.

‘Would father like regular or decaf?’ the 4-foot-something Werfel asked them one by one.

Regardless of the priests’ individual preferences, she filled all their cups with coffee from the same pot. The coffee drinkers silently accepted what they got, as though Werfel really could turn regular coffee into decaffeinated, much the way that the biblical Jesus turned water into wine.

(p. 116)

The second obituary constructs an identity for a woman by a series of adjectives describing aspects of her personal identity and characteristic practices.

Described fondly as demanding, disorganized, unpunctual and ‘dotty,’ [Anat Rosenberg] was at the same time intelligent, loving, witty, supportive and loyal and obsessed with buying bags, jewellery and shoes.

(pp. 180–181)

A7.4 HOW IS IDENTITY CO-CONSTRUCTED?

In the previous two sections, we have discussed how individuals attempt to create an identity for themselves by using language that constructs their membership in social categories such as gender, class or rank, profession, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Because identity construction is never the work of a single individual, we have also shown how others altercast identities by the use of naming practices, address forms, and honorifics; and we have shown how narratives construct relational and interactional identities in obituaries. In this section, we ask: How do the self’s construction and the altercasting of others interact? Or, as Jacoby and Ochs (1995) termed it, how is identity co-constructed? To answer that question we will discuss co-construction of identity that results from speech accommodation, resistance to ascribed identity, and identity confusion.

Speech accommodation is selection of linguistic forms and interactional patterns by a speaker in response to the identity or identities that the speaker perceives in the audience. An individual speaker creates identity with the linguistic and interactional forms that are employed, and each speaker commands a range of variation – of pronunciations, of accents, of vocabulary, and of other linguistic and interactional resources. The way that these resources are assembled in a particular context is known as language style or speech style. Allan Bell (1984) showed that the selection by a speaker of one style over another is influenced by the speaker’s perception of the identities of hearers, a theory that became known as ‘Audience Design.’ Bell’s theory builds on the framework of participation that we

introduced in Unit A3. In theorizing participation framework, Goffman (1979, 1981) described the production roles of participants and he also identified several roles for hearers, all of whom may affect a speaker. The main hearer role is the *addressee*, who is the person known, ratified, and directly addressed by the speaker, but other persons in the audience may also influence the speech style of the speaker. These include those who are known and ratified but not directly addressed or *auditors*, as well as those *overhearers* that the speaker knows to be there but has not ratified, and *eavesdroppers* – persons whose presence is unknown. Bell pictures audience members positioned in concentric circles, as in Figure A7.3, with those participants closer to the speaker in the center having a potentially greater influence on the speaker's style.

Bell based his theory of Audience Design on his observations of how broadcasters in the mass media change their speech styles according to the audience they believed they were addressing. Although audience design explains how identities are co-constructed, the motivation for style shifting is the speaker's *perception* of the audience, and that perception may in fact be mistaken. Such misperception can lead to an identity construction for the speaker which diverges from the audience rather than converging. Hypercorrection is often the result of such misperception. Hypercorrection from below refers to the alteration of a speaker's normal usage based on the speaker's mistaken interpretation of a prestige linguistic form, while hypercorrection from above results from a speaker's mistaken avoidance of stigmatized speech. Hypercorrection from below was found by Labov (1966, 1972b) in his work on the social stratification of English in New York City. In his study of the relationship between social class and the pronunciation of English by speakers in New York City, Labov observed that New Yorkers' pronunciation of 'r' after a vowel in words like 'thirty,' 'fourth,' and 'car' varied systematically with the speaker's social class. The higher the socio-economic class

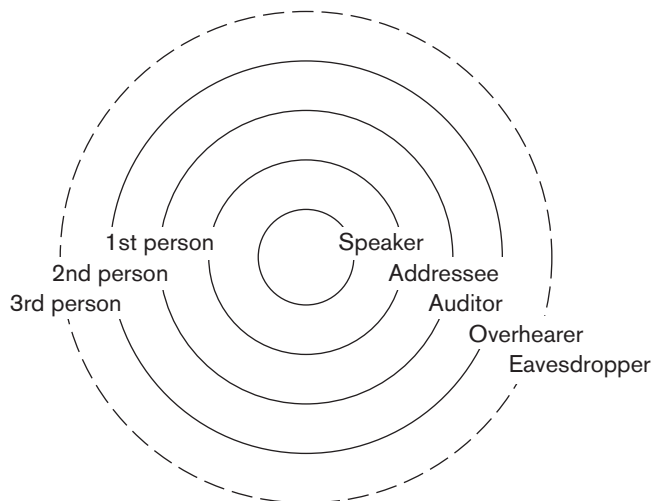


Figure A7.3
Roles and identities
in interaction.
Source: Bell (1984),
Figure 5, p. 159

of the speaker the more frequent r-coloring of the vowel occurred, while speakers from the lower socioeconomic classes produced far less r-coloration. The correlation between socioeconomic class and pronunciation of 'r' was consistent in all cases except for lower-middle-class speakers, who recognized the prestige value of 'r' but hypercorrected by producing r-colored vowels *more often* than upper-middle-class speakers. The parallel process of hypercorrection from below is observed in British English when speakers avoid the stigmatized dropping of an initial 'h' from words like 'have' and 'Harry' but hypercorrect by pronouncing an 'h' in words where it does not exist in the prestige form, for example pronouncing an initial 'h' in [ə'hɑ:mful] for 'an armful.'

As Jacoby and Ochs (1995) point out, 'co-construction does not necessarily entail affiliative or supportive interactions' (p. 171). In fact, identity claimed by one participant may be rejected by another, and an identity that is altercast may be resisted. An amusing example of how participants negotiate their way out of this kind of identity confusion is the following scene from the long-running TV comedy series *Seinfeld*. The scene is Monk's Diner, where Elaine is sitting at a table waiting for her boyfriend, Darryl. The Black waitress hands Elaine a menu.⁵

- 1 *Elaine, to the black waitress*: Long day?
- 2 *Waitress*: Yeah, I just worked a triple shift.
- 3 *Elaine*: I hear ya, Sister.
- 4 *Waitress*: Sister?
- 5 *Elaine, as Darryl comes into Monk's*: Yeah. It's okay. My boyfriend's black.
- 6 Here he is. See?
- 7 *Darryl*: Hi, Elaine.
- 8 *Elaine*: Hey.
- 9 *Waitress*: He's black?
- 10 *Elaine*: Yeah.
- 11 *Darryl*: I'm black?
- 12 *Elaine*: Aren't you?
- 13 *Waitress, leaving*: I'll give you a couple minutes to decide.
- 14 *Darryl*: What are you talking about?
- 15 *Elaine*: You're black. You said we were an interracial couple.
- 16 *Darryl*: We are. Because you're Hispanic.
- 17 *Elaine*: I am?
- 18 *Darryl*: Aren't you?
- 19 *Elaine*: No. Why would you think that?
- 20 *Darryl*: Your name's Benes, your hair, and you kept taking me to those
- 21 Spanish restaurants.
- 22 *Elaine*: That's because I thought you were black.
- 23 *Darryl*: Why would you take me to a Spanish restaurant because I'm black?
- 24 *Elaine*: I don't think we should be talking about this.
- 25 *Darryl*: So, what are you?
- 26 *Elaine*: I'm white.
- 27 *Darryl*: So, we're just a couple of white people?

- 28 *Elaine*: I guess.
 29 *Darryl*: Oh.
 30 *Elaine*: Yeah. So do you want to go to The Gap?
 31 *Darryl, leaving with Elaine*: Sure.

Elaine first attempts ethnic solidarity with the Black waitress by calling her ‘sister’ in line 3, an attempt that the waitress queries in the following line. Elaine then justifies her attempt by telling the waitress that her boyfriend Darryl is black. As Darryl arrives, in line 11 he challenges Elaine’s altercasting him as Black. The waitress retreats, while Darryl and Elaine try to work out their ethnic identities. Darryl says that he altercast Elaine as Hispanic because of her name, her frizzy black hair, and because she kept taking him to Spanish restaurants, but in line 22 Elaine claims that her choice of restaurants was based on her belief that Darryl was Black, a reasoning that Darryl doesn’t accept. After much confusion of their ethnic identities, Darryl and Elaine finally realize in lines 27–29 that they are not an interracial couple and agree that they do in fact share an ethnic identity – White. The scene ends as they repair to a store that is well known for marketing preppy clothing to Whites.

A7.5 IDENTITY AND AGENCY

In the previous section, we have focused on an individual’s freedom to manipulate a flexible system of identities but, as Paul Kroskrity (2000) points out, this fails to adequately take into account that some identities – notably race, caste, and gender – are imposed and coercively applied. There are indeed political and economic constraints on processes of identity-making. The terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ distinguish groups of people based on certain characteristics. The most widely used human racial categories are based on visible traits (especially skin color, facial features, and hair texture), as well as self-identification and beliefs about common ancestry. Perhaps because of the visibility of these traits, the master identity of race or ethnicity has a greater permanence than others. Related to race is caste, which is used to distinguish groups that are identified by traditional, hereditary systems of social restriction and social stratification, systems that are often enforced by law or common practice. Finally, gender is a social (not a biological) identity that has begun to lose its coercive force in contemporary Western societies after the feminist revolution of the 1960s. In many societies, however, gender remains a master category that is applied coercively to women, as this story told of a meeting held in Tehran in preparation for the UN-sponsored World Conference against Racism in 2001 illustrates (Sorabji, 2001, March 4).

In Iran, ladies are required to cover their heads with a scarf in public. Some women delegates inadvertently omitted to observe this injunction during the conference. The result was an angry public demonstration and a demand for the resignation of the Minister who organised the conference!

Organized social situations and political institutions, often referred to pejoratively as ‘the system,’ are responsible for imposing and coercively applying identities to groups with the aim of maintaining their subordinate status in society. Such power is not necessarily exercised by violent means but often through mystification of the individuals to whom power is applied and even of those individuals tasked with enforcing systemic power. An example of how this applies in education is provided by Nikhat Shameem (2007) in her description of social interaction in multilingual classrooms in Fiji.

In multilingual Fiji, the community language of Fijians of Indian ancestry is Fiji Hindi, a common language that evolved over the years from the dialects of Hindi spoken by indentured laborers brought to the Fiji islands by the British in the nineteenth century. Fijians of Indian ancestry constitute 38 percent of Fiji’s population but there has always been a political and economic struggle between Indians and native Fijians to the extent that Fijian citizens of Indian descent are officially referred to simply as ‘Indian.’ Fiji Hindi today has diverged significantly from the varieties of Hindi and Urdu spoken on the Indian subcontinent, but the colonial government of Fiji established a different variety of Hindi, known as Shudh (or ‘pure’) Hindi as the standard because this variety enjoyed the status of official language in India. Although it was a variety that was already codified and was incorporated as a language of education in Fiji, it was not the variety used by the majority of Indians. The diglossic situation of Fiji Hindi and Shudh Hindi is complicated by the colonial language, English, which is the official language. Shameem reports that after Fijian independence from Britain in 1990, the official language education policy has been to use Shudh Hindi for teaching Indo-Fijian children in the first three years of primary school before transitioning to English in the later years of schooling, although the community language is Fiji Hindi, which differs from the standard variety. Shameem’s research shows that, in their responses to questionnaires, primary-school teachers reported much greater use of Shudh Hindi than was the case when she observed actual language use. She reports that ‘while three [first grade] teachers had reported using English and three a combination of English and F[iji] H[india] as language of instruction in their English lessons, observation showed that in fact six of the eight teachers were using only English while the other two used both’ (p. 209). The divergence between reported and actual language use has two important implications when viewed from the perspective of identity coercively imposed by official policy on a subordinate group. First, although ‘the system’ may constrain language choice by these teachers to some degree, the constraint is much more effective on their consciousness; that is, what they believe about their own language choice. The system provides a ready-made mystification for these teachers of their own practice, a practice which actually diverges from their own beliefs about what they do. Second, the systematic encouragement of teachers’ preference for the High variety of Hindi over the variety that the children know best appears to do little to maintain either variety as a community asset and, in fact, encourages maintenance of the colonial language – English. The Fijian situation thus appears parallel to many postcolonial situations, where the use of English is encouraged at the expense of the languages of indigenous peoples.

A7.6 CROSSING

In the preceding section, we have discussed how certain aspects of master identity are coercively applied and shown that individuals have very few options to elude the master identities of race, caste, and gender that are ascribed to them. The groups to which such identities are ascribed are those on the lower rungs of society whose lower social position is enforced by others higher up. Curiously perhaps, the master identities which some individuals cannot elude are precisely those which others choose to adopt, albeit for a relatively short span of time. Members of more prestigious social groups may adopt the identity of the subordinate groups for several reasons: They may do so in order to express their rejection of the systemic hierarchy or, in a time when lifestyles are commodified, because they find some aspects of the subordinate group's identity attractive. Such appropriation of the language, interaction, and other symbolic codes of the subordinate group is known as 'crossing' and has been researched extensively by Ben Rampton (1998, 1999, 2005).

Examples of crossing into a lower socioeconomic class are shown in Part 3 of the PBS video *People like us: Social class in America* (Alvarez *et al.*, 2001). The segment was shot in Baltimore, Maryland, once well known as a working-class city with friendly corner bars and waitresses who called everybody 'Hon' (short for 'Honey'). Now, with most of the big factories gone, middle-class families are moving into the old neighborhoods or dropping in from the suburbs for a visit. The newcomers are crossing into the old working-class identities in a spirit of fun, games, and nostalgia celebrated every year at 'The HonFest.' The HonFest is an annual event in Baltimore when middle-class women don beehive hairdos, cat-eye glasses, pink poodles, and feather boas to compete in a competition to see who has the most authentic working-class accent in public speaking performances of lines like 'Hi hon, how you doin?' 'Hon, you want coffee?' and 'Hey hon, you goin downey ocean?'

The HonFest is an opportunity for middle-class people to 'cross' into a different and lower social class, but there is a much wider phenomenon of crossing across racial and ethnic boundaries that has been documented by Cecilia Cutler (1999). Most people who have listened to Black rappers and hip hop music will recognize that Black youth language creates an aura of toughness and sexuality. In the chorus of the hit song *In da club* by Black rapper 50 Cent, for example, the message comes over loud and clear: 'You can find me in da club, bottle full of bub / Look mami i got the X, if you into takin drugs / Im into havin sex i aint into makin love / So come give me a hug if you into gettin rubbed.' Essentially, hip hop has become a prestige language for today's youth just as hip hop fashions and music have come to dominate adolescent buying habits. Linguistic crossing into the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) used in hip hop allows young people to experiment with alternative identities and has the potential for breaking down ethnic barriers by creating new forms of youth culture. The potential for this sort of development among the droves of White hip hop fans in suburbia exists even in the face of substantial opposition from other Whites and Blacks.

SUMMARY AND LOOKING AHEAD

Talk helps us to construct an identity for ourselves and to cast others in a certain identity. Identity has many facets, primarily those identified by Karen Tracy as master, personal, interactional, and relational identities, and different aspects of a person's identity can change while others aspects remain fixed over a long period of time. A person's talk – their accent, in-group vocabulary, tone of voice, and preferred topics of conversation – is one of the primary means by which other people construct an identity for a person, an identity that sometimes we welcome and sometimes we resist. Telling a story about a person's deeds and misdeeds, likes and dislikes, friends and foes is one of the most powerful ways in which identities are constructed, and if we don't like the identity constructed for us in the narrative, we can always tell a different story – unless, of course, the narrative is an obituary. The way that we project an identity for ourselves is partly strategic and partly, perhaps mostly, out of our control. If we strategically project an identity, then we design it for an audience, but there are some aspects of our identity that it is very difficult to escape such as race, gender, and age – although we may playfully cross into an identity that we prefer by copying some stereotypes of speech and clothing of the target group.

Much of the work we do to construct an identity for ourselves and for others is done to locate an individual within a social group. If those groups are ones with which we identify, we often refer to them as communities and one of the ways in which we identify communities is by the shared speech styles, appearances, beliefs, and discursive practices of their members. In the next unit will we investigate further how those identity characteristics help to create a community.