All the terms featured here have to do with constructions or representations of people, in and out of language. They partly – but only partly – correspond to traditional terms such as author, character, individual and person. However, they so radically challenge and change these concepts that any grounds for comparison soon dissolve. The basic difference is that talking about people as ‘subjects’ and ‘agents’, ‘identities’ and ‘roles’ tends to emphasise the social and historical constructedness of their relations and the political power (or powerlessness) those relations entail. Talk of ‘authors’ and ‘characters’, ‘individuals’ and ‘persons’, however, tends to emphasise their uniqueness and/or their universality. This is why the former terms are often found in politically self-conscious critical discourses such as those of CULTURAL MATERIALISM, FEMINISM and POSTCOLONIALISM (usually in harness with notions of ideology and power); whereas the latter are often found in more overtly liberal or humanist critical discourses such as those of NEW CRITICISM and Leavisism (usually in harness with notions of truth and human nature). To be sure, these various critical vocabularies and the positions they represent can, for a while, be tied into the same critical project. But ultimately they operate in different dimensions and are pulling different conceptions of LANGUAGE, LITERATURE and CULTURE in different directions.

**Subject** is a term with a complex history and wide range of applications. It is helpful to distinguish four meanings:

1. **subject matter or topic**: what a particular text, film or picture, etc. is about (e.g., ‘It’s about Russia!’, as the speed-reader remarked of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*);

2. **academic subject or discipline**: the particular configuration of knowledge and skills associated with a specific area of expertise and a specific institutional slot (e.g., English Studies, Psychology, Computing, Environmental Sciences);

3. **the grammatical subject**: what controls the verb in traditional grammar, as distinct from the grammatical object (‘She threw the ball’, for instance, has the structure subject ‘She’, verb ‘threw’ and object ‘the ball’);

4. **an ideological or psycho-social subject**: someone implicated in and subjected to a particular personal-political structure and its associated world-view. Thus, archaically, we talk of people being ‘royal’ or ‘British subjects’, meaning they are subject to the power of the monarch or are British citizens subject to the laws of that country. More recently and specifically, in the contemporary usage of such Social Sciences as psychology, anthropology, sociology and politics, it is common to talk of persons being the ‘subjects of’ (i.e. subjected to) cultural institutions and **discourses** of all kinds. Althusser explores the conflictual nature of this kind of subject in a political sphere (see MARXISM). Freud and Lacan explore it in a specifically psychoanalytic sphere (see PSYCHOLOGY). Relatedly, the linguist Benveniste was careful to distinguish two dimensions of the ‘I’: the ‘I-who-speaks’ (*le sujet d’énonciation*) and the ‘I-who-is-spoken’(*le sujet d’énoncé*). The ‘I-who-speaks’ is always to some extent mis- or underrepresented by the ‘I-who-is-spoken’.
The fourth meaning of ‘subject’ (ideological subject) has bulked largest because it is the most complex and contentious and also perhaps the least familiar. However, it is a central term in cultural debates of all kinds, so we shall look at its precise implications more closely, as well as alternatives to it.

Subject derives from the Latin verb subiacere: ‘to throw under’ (subjectum, the past participle, means ‘thrown under’). This derivation may help explain some people’s resistance to the term. If one is ‘thrown under’ something by someone, then this implies a kind of passivity. Subjects are perhaps thereby cast in the roles of victims, those who are ‘done to’ rather than those who themselves ‘do’ (despite the grammatical sense of subject (3) above). For this reason some people prefer the term participant, which refers to anyone who takes part in an event, regardless of their activity or passivity. Still others prefer the term agent because it implies a degree of activity and independence, even if the agent is partly acting on behalf of someone or something else. Moreover, there is a strong tradition in philosophical discourse of agency meaning ‘the power to do’, ‘the force that causes effects’. (The word derives from the Latin verb agere: ‘to act, to make happen’; hence English ‘agitateur’, employment and advertising agencies, and secret agents.)

A handy compromise is to recognise subject and agent as the passive and active dimensions of the same process. That is, each of us is potentially a subject/agent (a subject and an agent, simultaneously or by turns). We are subjects in so far as we are ‘thrown under’ things – politically oppressed or psychologically repressed. But at the same time we are also agents, capable of ‘doing things’ and ‘making things happen’, politically and psychologically active in our own remaking. In terms of history, we may therefore see ourselves as both making and being made by it. In terms of narrative, we may see ourselves as both the teller and the told.

Referring to people in terms of their roles is another alternative. Often found in such phrases as ‘playing a role’, ‘adopting a role’ or ‘role play’, the concept of role obviously depends upon a dramatic or theatrical metaphor. So do the concepts ‘mask’ and ‘persona’ (cf., ‘dramatis personae’) when applied to non-theatrical contexts. Such analogies are most famously put by Jaques in his Seven Ages of Man speech in Shakespeare’s As You Like It (Act II sc. vii): ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players . . . ‘. This play/world, player/person analogy has been highly productive in many areas of thought, not only in Literary Studies. It has been especially powerful in the Social Sciences where it is now routine to talk of, say, ‘roles within the family’ or ‘social roles’, ‘role models’ and ‘switching’ or ‘modifying’ roles. By extension, ethnographers and others now commonly talk of scripts, scenarios and *schemata when referring to predictable genres of speech and other discourse activity in routine (i.e. non-theatrical and non-filmic) situations. Thus we can legitimately and quite suggestively talk of real – not just fictional – judges, police officers, students, lecturers speaking and behaving ‘in role’ and ‘playing their parts’. Still other analysts prefer to talk of these same situations in terms of frames and schemata, thereby drawing on analogies with the visual arts, especially photography and cinema, as well as logic.

Identity is another relatable term which has achieved wide critical currency in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Philosophically and in Mathematics, the term has been around for a long time with the specialised sense of ‘absolute sameness’ or ‘absolute equality between two equations’ (see OED; the Latin root is idem, meaning ‘the same one’; cf. idiosynchrony and *idiolect). During the past thirty years, however, ‘identity’ has been increasingly used to refer to the social and historical make-up of a
person, personality as a construct. Sometimes such identities are conceived in narrowly psychological, individualist terms, as the cumulative result of personal experience and family history. Sometimes identities are conceived in broadly sociological, constructivist terms, as the cumulative result of public pressure and larger historical circumstance. However, the most subtle and resourceful approaches to identity always draw upon a fusion of—or tension between—these two approaches. Identity is thereby recognised as a product of private and public histories, a richly psycho-social and personal-political process of becoming (i.e. *auto/biography* in the fullest and most challenging sense).

Identification too, we may note, is a suggestively ambiguous process. The ambiguity hinges on the difference between the concepts ‘identification of’ and ‘identification with’; also the distance between other and self:

- **Identification ‘of’ someone or something** entails pointing to, labelling and in effect ‘naming’ them as other (as in an identity parade).

- **Identification ‘with’ someone or something** entails sympathising and, in extreme cases, empathising and confusing our selves with someone or something else (as when we identify with a character/cause).

The process of identification in a fully dynamic sense therefore involves perceiving identity as other and as self. Arguably, some such complication occurs when we identify with characters in plays or novels, or when we identify with figures in life generally (by falling in love, for instance). The aesthetics and politics of identification are much more complex and contentious than ‘identity politics’ conceived as a mere process of labelling.

**Activities**

(a) **A matter of people.** Choose a short story, novel or play and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of approaching the figures represented as subjects, agents, identities and roles, or as individuals and persons. What differences in emphasis and approach are entailed? Alternatively, can everything be covered by notions of **character and characterisation?** (Suggestions: compare Kipling’s *The Story of Muhammad Din* with Atwood’s *Happy Endings* or Carter’s *The Werewolf* with Eggers’s *What the Water Feels Like to the Fishes* – all in 5.2.1.)

(b) **‘Identities in crisis.** Concentrate on a text which features a first person speaker or narrator, an ‘I’ (e.g., those in 5.3.4). How would you identify that figure in terms of gender, class, race, education, attitudes, expectations? And how far do you identify with him or her? In what ways are these two processes of identification connected?

(c) **Tran/scripts and roles.** Cut a script or transcript at a potentially significant point. Consider the various roles in play up to that point and plot two alternative outcomes from there onwards. (Explore this through role-playing with colleagues if you wish.) Go on to discuss the nature of roles, masks, scripts, scenarios, frames and schemata in life at large. (Any of the texts in 5.3.3 will do, or the first two in 5.3.1; there are also some transcripts and scripts in 5.2.6.).
(i) The subject is seen no longer as the source of meaning but as the site of meaning.

(ii) It is not theatre that is able to imitate life; it is social life that is designed as a continuous performance.

(iii) All the world’s a Visual Display Unit – and all the men and women merely cyphers in cyber-space . . .
   Members of the Language, Literature, Discourse III group, Oxford, Spring 1997

Also see: PSYCHOLOGY; POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND POSTMODERNISM; author; auto/biography; character; drama and theatre. @ Prologue: Actual and Virtual . . . Local and Global.
