THE NOTION OF IDENTITY IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: SOME 'DISCOURSE ANALYTICAL' REMARKS

by

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In the last decades the focus on identity in social sciences has increased enormously. Discourse analysis has not missed out on this trend. Identity is rapidly becoming a buzzword to which academics of all sorts gladly refer. This has led to fascinating new insights in the study of human behaviour and social interaction. Unfortunately its sudden rise has also brought with it a series of vague assertions and disturbing inconsistencies. In this paper I want to briefly address a few of these difficulties, submitting some theoretical texts to a critical discourse analysis of their own.

1. *What is identity?*

Before going deeper into detail concerning the various issues surrounding identity, we will first take a look at the definition of the concept. When searching for the basic dictionary definition, we find the following one in the third edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: '*The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality*' (online version). When reduced to even more basic wordings, we can quote Paulin Djité who writes that 'identity is the everyday word for people's sense of who they are' (Djité 2006:6).

It is this 'sense of who they are' that can be taken as a starting point to refine the definition of the concept. Baggioni & Kasbarian (1996) begin by distinguishing two types of identity, namely the personal and the collective. They name 'identification' as the process linking the former to the latter.[1] We see that in the majority of discourse analytical studies this collective identity is privileged, mainly under the name of 'social identity'. Social identity is then, as in Duszak's definition, 'that

part of an individual's self-concept that came from knowledge of his/her membership in a social group, together with emotional significance attached to it' (Duszak 2002:2). The element of membership to a group is also salient in Kroskrity's definition: 'Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories' (Kroskrity 1999:111). When rephrasing Djité's basic definition, we could thus state that identity is in many cases interpreted as 'people's sense of what, who or where they belong to'.

This 'sense' turns into a more active concept when identity is seen as the product of an act of self-definition. By a process of individuation people define themselves as belonging to certain entities (Castells 2001). This act in its turn leads to the generation of a notion of 'otherness', or as Tajfel & Forgas put it: 'We are what we are because they are not what we are' (Tajfel & Forgas 1981:124). It is this self-definition together with the social aspect of identity which in my opinion counter Geschiere & Meyer's (1998) critique on the notion of identity. In referring to Rouse (1995), the authors state that the sudden popularity of the notion of identity in social sciences is a mere reflection of the specific interests of Western research, with its capitalist discourse emphasising private ownership, thus suggesting that every individual has to 'own' an identity. When we look at the two aspects of identity described above, we note however that identity is not simply an interesting theoretical notion imposed upon people. First, the general interest in social identity simply matches the observation of a universal human need to belong to or be member of a group. And secondly the aspect of self-definition makes clear that identity is very often an instrument of agency and a source of meaning for the actors themselves (Castells 2001). Identity is thus the concept used in social science to describe a certain sense of belonging, reflecting people's need to define themselves and others.

2. Multiple identities

After this first introduction into the definition of this central and popular notion, we can now have a closer look at the common observations researchers have made on it. A first thing the majority of scientists agree upon is the polyvalence or multiplicity of identity (Davies & Harré 1990; Duszak 2002; Geschiere & Meyer 1998; Kroskrity 1999; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). Identity cannot be seen as a monolithic entity to which individuals do or do not correspond. As Duszak (2002) expresses it very rightly, identity rather constitutes a continuum of 'ingroupness' to 'outgroupness' in which every person can take on different positions. Beside this possibility of gradation, each individual has the capability of combining several identities. As Davies & Harré put it, 'the positions created for oneself and the other are not part of a linear non-contradictory autobiography' (Davies & Harré 1990:49). Furthermore, when we look at the micro-level of conversations, identities can shift in the course of one conversation according to the different story lines that are taken up (Davies & Harré 1990).

Kroskrity (1999), naming this potential the 'repertoires of identity', makes the useful remark that this multiplicity is not a particular characteristic of modern nor of urban life, as suggested by several academics. Individuals belonging to pre-modern societies, or to rural communities, (had) have to face these multiple identity choices too. In this respect authors such as Anthony Giddens (1991) unrealistically hang on to an ideal of some coherent identity when they claim that modernity brings with it a disturbing multiplication of identities. Indeed Giddens states that modernity involves for the individual 'dilemmas which, on one level or another, have to be resolved in order to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity' (Giddens 1991:188). The author presents this coherence as characteristic of 'pre-modern' contexts. He goes even as far as to name the identities constructed by the individual in different contexts 'pseudo-selves' in contrast with a 'true self' (Giddens 1991:191). We see here that Giddens takes the multiplicity of

identities as a deviant phenomenon and starts out from an idealized notion of a unified, non influenced, 'true' identity. This is actually the kind of attitude that Davies and Harré mention when they explain that multiple identities are often experienced by human beings as problematic, given the 'social/grammatical construction of the person as a unitary knowable identity' (Davies & Harré 1990:59). We can observe this idea of unity also in the dictionary definition given at the beginning of this article.

This is thus a first problematic point in contemporary studies of the notion of identity: on the one hand we have an acquired scientific insight into the multiplicity of identity, but on the other hand we often seem to be stuck with a sort of cognitive inability to imagine this multiplicity. The many studies that fall back on a notion of unity and our everyday representations of identity testify to this. Geschiere & Meyer (1998) rightly interpret this as an obsessive wish to fix and to clarify, a human reaction to the rather awkward reality of multiplicity. It is our responsibility to remain conscious of this human need to simplify, closely taking care we don't let it slip into our research.

3. The constructed nature of identity

A second well-known observation in the field is the constructed nature of identity. In accordance with the linguistic turn that has marked the poststructuralist evolution in philosophy and social science, we have gained the insight that identity is not some sort of independently existing reality outside the individual, but that it is actively constructed by this individual. Before developing this key issue, we have to acknowledge that the terminology used in relation to it is sometimes rather confusing, and this paper – by lack of extended conceptual elaboration - does not escape from this either. I thus admit that I have not taken the effort to unambiguously define such concepts as 'the individual', 'the subject', 'the self', 'social realities' or 'group membership'. However I do think this first rough exploration of the

issue can already point in the direction of some difficulties in need of attention.

In this new perception of identity offered by poststructuralism, language and discourse play an important role. If we look at Kroskrity's definition again, we note that he considers identity as the 'linguistic construction' of group membership (Kroskrity 1999:111). It is language that gives us the tools to construct and reshape our identities. In their positioning theory, Davies & Harré (1990) claim that the self is constituted through processes of social interaction. As a consequence, they say, 'who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer' (Davies & Harré 1990:46). According to the authors, poststructuralism thus, in ascribing a central role to the constitutive power of discourse, aligns with narratology. They resume their stance as the adoption of an 'immanentist' view in opposition with 'transcendentalism': social realities are not pre-existing outside language but are on the contrary immanent to it (Davies & Harré 1990:44). This parallels what Hall calls the 'anti-essentialist' or 'deconstructive' critique of the concept of identity (Hall 1996:1). According to Hall this deconstructionist movement however brings with it a problematic aspect, namely the fact that it does not replace the concepts it has rejected by 'truer' ones. It only puts the criticised concepts 'under erasure'. This leads Hall to conclude that 'there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them' (Hall 1996:1).

It is this continuation of working with the problematic concept of identity that causes dissatisfaction in reading many discourse analytical studies dealing with identity. However correct and meaningful the new finding may be, we get the impression that many discourse studies don't go any further than the mere recognition of it. It is as if the observation that identity is constructed has become a mantra that is in no need of further investigation or questioning. The mantra is even so vaguely expressed that many confusions and contradictions arise. We can note this in the following examples. If we take a closer look at Kroskrity's text on identity (1999), we see that he starts off by defining the notions of 'identity' and 'group membership or category', indicating that the

former is the construction of the latter by linguistic means: 'Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories' (Kroskrity 1999:111).

Given the form *A is the construction of B* of this definition, we should conclude that we are dealing here with two *constructed* realities. Leaving aside the difficult question of what is then the specific relationship between the two notions (could identity be seen as the somewhat more final result of the constructive action begun in category?), I will choose to interpret this definition in the light of the new poststructuralist theory. Following also Davies and Harré's principle, identity is thus more than just the *representation* of some 'real world' group membership, it is its very *constitution*. We could say that there is no such thing as an external group membership or category to which identity would relate in a merely indexical way. Taking the essence of this theory as a starting point, we can now subject Kroskrity's text itself to a discourse analytical examination. We note that in some cases Kroskrity rightly reflects this new insight in his wordings: he writes about identities that are 'established' or 'communicatively produced' (Kroskrity 1999:112). But in more cases he does not hold on to the theory, using terms that suggest a merely indexical relation between linguistic utterances and some sort of externally existing identities: he states that identities are 'displayed', 'performed' or 'communicated' through language. All these terms seem to suppose a pre-existing identity, in which language only has the remaining function of 'showing' this identity. This observation is confirmed by the sentence in which Kroskrity talks about the 'importance of language as an identity *indicator*' (Kroskrity 1999:112, my emphasis). The body of the text is thus not at all consistent with the premises presented at the beginning. Kroskrity does not hold on to his definition on the constructed nature of identity.

We find this same lack of consistency in Bauman's article on language and identity (2000). Bauman also begins his text by stating clearly that identity is a linguistic construct. He tries to emphasize the individual's agency by introducing the notion of 'performance', saying that linguistic performances are the loci in which identity is constructed. Nevertheless, Bauman continues to talk about 'performative *display*'

(Bauman 2000:3, my emphasis), thus suggesting an external reality which is only 'displayed' or represented through performance. Another key word he uses is the term 'indexical', again doing harm to the hypothesis that identity is entirely constructed. When we look at some less evident examples, we find that even Davies and Harré's (1990) foundational text presents some of these confusing terminologies. In describing the consecutive steps in the process of identity construction, they cite the following:

1. Learning the categories which include some people and exclude others, e.g. male/female, father/daughter;

2. Participating in the various discursive practices through which meanings are allocated to those categories. These include the story lines through which different subject positions are elaborated.

   (Davies & Harré 1990:47)

What is confusing here is that the consecutive steps 'learning the categories' and 'meanings are allocated' seem to suggest that the construction of identity is an allocation of meaning to pre-existing categories. We suppose of course that this is not what the authors have intended to say and that the pre-existence of the categories is only true from the perspective of the individual, the categories still being constructed by former discursive practices from a collective point of view. Nevertheless, we see that this same confusion is present in other studies as well, for example in Baggioni & Kasbarian's text on the production of identity in francophone contexts:

La 'parole intime' réfère aux expression de l'identité, à une identité qui se construit dans le discours. En tant qu'accomplissement pratique, l'identité s'élabore dans les actes qui la signifient, quand des sujets attribuent à des *éléments de l'environnement* (traits sociaux,

ethniques, culturels, linguistiques) une *valeur* particulière pour sa description et son interprétation. (Baggioni & Kasbarian 1996:859, my emphases)

Once again the construction of identity is interpreted as an *attribution* of value or meaning to pre-existing environmental elements.

The series of confusions cited above show that there is still a large degree of vagueness as to what or how many social realities are precisely constructed and whether there are still sorts of categories that exist independently outside discourse. These are very difficult questions of pre-existence and of presupposition. Hall touches this question when he writes about the problematic relationship between 'the individual' and 'the subject'. He identifies a problem of presupposition in Foucault's theory:

> By neglecting to analyse how the social positions of individuals interact with the construction of certain 'empty' discursive subject positions, Foucault reinscribes an antinomy between subject positions and the individuals who occupy them. Thus his archaeology provides a critical, but one-dimensional, formal account of the subject of discourse. Discursive subject positions become *a priori* categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion. (McNay 1994:76-7; Hall 1996:10)

When subject positions become *a priori* categories, we are back at the very beginning of the whole poststructuralist debate. Some studies seem to resolve this problem by accepting the existence of external identity categories. This is for example the case in Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou's study on the construction of youth identities, in which they state that the identities constructed in discourse are limited to micro-categories. Beside these, there are still external macro-categories that exist outside discourse: 'linguistic resources and activity types are shown to bring about, index or be shaped by certain macro-categories (i.e. larger, extra-situational or exogenous categories)' (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003:8). Hausendorf & Kessel-

heim make a very interesting contribution by – maybe unintentionally – establishing a distinction between 'socially effective' and 'socially ineffective' categories:

> It is the merit of (critical) discourse analysis to have focused on the *discursive* expression of social comparison and to have stressed that social categories and the differences among them have to be communicated if they shall become socially effective. (Hausendorf & Kesselheim 2002:267)

We see that the authors can be subjected to the same critique as the ones cited before, by their writing about 'discursive *expression* ' and 'communication' instead of 'construction'. But what is interesting here is that they establish a sort of in-between theory: social categories *can* pre-exist discourse, but only in a socially ineffective, non functioning, we could say somewhat latent way. They only come to full existence, functioning and socially effective, when they are in a way 'made operational' in discourse.

4. Conclusion

The few difficulties in identity research I have pointed out here have in common that they result from a lack of consistency with one or more theoretical premises. The most striking case is the one concerning the constructed nature of identity. Without wanting to introduce a final solution to this complex debate, my discussion is an attempt to prevent current research from leaning back in too comfortable a position. We as researchers of identity construction should try to be consistent with the merits of poststructuralist theory, pushing it to its limits and trying to explore the many interesting aspects of it. If we take the evolution of the linguistic turn in social science seriously, we should be careful in continuing to use such notions as 'category' as if they were pre-existing. If we don't, we should make the effort to accurately define where we

draw the limits of the theory. Adding to this, a second critique goes beyond the theoretical debate on the constructed nature of identity and makes requirements on the actual elaboration of the research. As Castells puts it: 'It is easy to agree on the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom and for what' (Castells 2001:7). Indeed too little an amount of all identity studies investigates these issues. This statement should motivate us to go as far as possible in trying to show how exactly, by which actors and with which objectives identity construction takes place.

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Note

1. That the two can't be separated that easily, is shown by Djité (2006) who argues that the individual identity is already partially made up of various group identities.

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