Identity in Intercultural Interaction:
How Categories Do Things

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Although identity has become a key topic in second language research, it is a problematic notion to research when considered to exist only in the individual's head. By operationalizing identity as the social display of self in relation to others, discourse analytic approaches such as Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) instead locate identity in interaction. Thus, this makes identity observable through the sequential details of talk. This paper (1) introduces the CA/MCA approach to identity as a social accomplishment and then (2) applies it to identity ascriptions in a study abroad context and an online English-speaking practice chat room. The analysis initially focuses on the role of epistemics and how discursive displays of knowledge help accomplish identity. It then goes on to demonstrate some of the ways that participants use identity categories as an interactional resource.

アイデンティティーの概念は第二言語研究においても近年その重要性を増しているが、内在的で不可視な存在であるため研究対象としては疑義的なものであった。この研究は、社会的表象としてのアイデンティティーを相互行為の中に突き止めるのではなく、会話分析や成員カテゴリー化分析等の談話分析的手法を用いて会話記録の詳細からアイデンティティーを解明する。まず会話分析と成員カテゴリー化分析の方法論を検証し、それらの分析方法を用いて短期留学とオンライン英会話チャットルームの環境下での帰属意識の表示と機能を分析する。本稿では成員関係の認識的機能と、またその推論的な知識の表示が参加者自らのアイデンティティー完遂にどう機能しているかに焦点を合わせる。そして実際に参加者が成員カテゴリーを会話方策としてどう使用しているか論証する。

Ever since the increase in post-structural approaches to research such as those of Bonnie Norton (2000) and David Block (2003), identity has become a major focus within Applied Linguistics. Teachers and learners alike are interested in the effect that acquiring a second language (L2) can have on the way we see ourselves, and conversely, how we express who we are in another language.

However, one of the problems with much of the research on identity to date has been that it is difficult to make robust claims about a construct that is understood to exist within the individual's head. Such findings are usually based on participant accounts, such as through interviews or diary entries, which ultimately provide insight into people's *reflections* on their identity rather than real-time evidence from actual instances of identity negotiation.

The position that this paper takes, on the other

hand, is that the only aspects of our identities that are relevant for other people are those that we make available through interaction, and that we as researchers can track them through the careful analysis of actual instances of talk, just as interactants do in real-time. As such, we treat identity not as an in-the-head phenomenon, but as Bucholtz and Hall have defined it, as "the social positioning of self and other" (2005, p.587).

First and foremost, identity is to be found in sociality; it takes two or more people to *do* identity. It is "talked into being" through the co-constructed meanings that interactants make relevant on a turn-by-turn basis. Using the related micro-discourse analytic approaches of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), this paper focuses on the role of epistemics in accomplishing intercultural identity and demonstrates some of the ways that identity categories can be used as an interactional resource.

How Do We Get at Identity Methodologically?

Before we consider some specific instances of identity in interaction, it is worth outlining the broad methodological stance that CA/MCA adopts with regard to this topic. The approach to identity presented here has developed from the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks during the 1960s (collected as Sacks, 1992). Sacks was arguably the first sociologist to highlight that participants in interaction have multiple potential identity labels; which identity is relevant to any ongoing interaction is not objectively defined, but is a matter for the speaker and his or her interlocutor(s) to decide. Therefore, it is not that talk is used for showing identity, but that identity becomes an interactional resource for getting things done.

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) put forward a number of key points when considering identity in interaction from a CA/MCA viewpoint. Firstly, once a participant's identity is made relevant during an instance of interaction, he or she is cast into an identity category with associated characteristics or features. This happens whether he or she is the person speaking,

being spoken to, being spoken about, or even acting as an in/out-group member. A group of members is often team-labelled as having the same characteristics or linked to certain category-bound activities (e.g. 'Punk-Rocker' associated with 'acting rough'). Those categorization expressions are based on local, here-and-now understandings determined through *indexicality* (who or what an identity category points to in this instance) and *occasionedness* (how it is brought about in this particular sequence of talk). This means the implications of having any given identity depend greatly on the conversational context. The work that an identity category is doing in any given instance is accessible to participants (and researchers) via its *procedural consequentiality*, the interactional influence it has on the ongoing talk. Finally, any identity that is relevant for the co-participants is made visible in the conversational structure of the talk.

In one sense, CA is people-watching taken to its analytical extremes; through a process of careful observation and meticulous transcription, researchers collect instances of particular conversation patterns within and across data samples and seek to distinguish between different interactional methods in order to describe and account for a range of interactional phenomena (Sidnell, 2010). Similarly, MCA is built on collections of cases, but here the emphasis is more squarely on identity or *membership*. Stokoe (2012) notes that in MCA, collections are of categorial instances of three main sorts: explicit mentions of categories (e.g. Japanese, student, female); membership categorization devices (e.g. family, band member); and category-resonant descriptions (categories that are not explicitly stated but are nonetheless implied). The analyst locates the sequential position of each categorial instance within the ongoing interaction and analyses the design of the turn and the action it accomplishes in order to look for evidence of how recipients orient to those categorial instances. Such research highlights the interactional consequences of a category's use, co-occurring component features of categorial formulation, and the way speakers build and resist categorization within and between turns.

Finally, it is worth pointing out some of the potential pitfalls of this sort of research. First of all, the notions

of membership and identity always belong to the participants, not the researcher. Successful CA/MCA research does not analyze identity from the researcher's subjective viewpoint, but instead aims to address its findings primarily as a demonstrable participant's concern. Researchers must look at how participants act in mundane talk, not pre-arranged situations created solely for research purposes. Furthermore, it should be noted that multiple identity/membership devices are often used spontaneously in talk. In addition, we cannot necessarily generalize features to other interactions, and we should not essentialize the notion of identity/membership (e.g. "S/he used the identity because s/he is Japanese").

This section has summarized the CA/MCA approach to researching identity/membership in interaction. By carrying out brief analyses of actual interaction, the next two sections will go on to discuss some features of intercultural identity categories and the interactional work they help to accomplish.

Epistemics and Intercultural Identity in Interaction

In recent years there has been a growing body of research into interculturality as a topic worth exploring in itself, rather than as an underlying reason to explain the motives behind a given instance of interaction (Mori, 2003; Nishizaka, 1999). A major thread that underpins such research is that intercultural identities are co-constructed in and through interaction and consequently become communicative resources for speakers.

While it could be argued that CA is ultimately about the turn-by-turn co-construction of identity (Heritage & Clayman, 2010), that does not necessarily mean the speakers' intercultural identities will be omnirelevant. This section will examine identity in interaction, particularly in relation to interculturality, by analysing some ways it becomes relevant in actual instances of conversation between a Japanese student and an American family. Pivotal to this analysis will be epistemics, the interactional display of participant claims to knowledge.

Consider Excerpt 1, taken from a dinner table conversation; a Japanese student, Shin, has been staying with an American homestay family in Seattle.

It is difficult to hear anything particularly intercultural going on in this segment; Dad initiates

```
01 Dad:    Did you wan- You brought your camera out.

02         (.)

03 Shin:   Well I- Yes yes

04 Dad:    Did you want to use it, or?

05 Shin:   Yeah, I wanted to use it- ah use that but ah the:

06         battery is run- run [out.

07 Jeni:                       [Do you

08         want ice cream?

09 Shin:   Yes, yes of course.

10 Jeni:   Okay.
```

Figure 1. Excerpt 1: Camera.

an inquiry about Shin's camera and Jeni offers him some ice cream. We do not hear this as intercultural communication because the participants themselves are not orienting to the talk as intercultural at this point. That is not to say there is no identity work happening – it is quite possible to see ways that these inquiries and offers work to socially locate the co-participants within other identity categories, such as *Host* and *Guest*, but these are not intercultural identity categories *per se*.

On the other hand, consider the segment in Excerpt 2 from a few minutes earlier in the same conversation.

This time Mom is serving some rice crackers that she has bought.

Here it seems there is a lot more going on in terms of intercultural identities. Mom does not simply put the crackers out. She also invites Shin to comment on them by asking him if he recognizes them, a turn that is formulated in such a way that we can hear Mom expects he will. In other words, she is affording him some level of epistemic status. However, in line 3 Shin gives a minimal response that demonstrates he is unfamiliar with the crackers. Mori (2006) has shown

```
01 Mom:    Do you recognize these crackers?
02 Shin:   ((leans forward, looks at package))
03         He::h
04 Mom:    Feng Shui (('Fung Shway'))
05         (.)
06 Shin:   Feng Shui?
07 Jeni:   Heh-heh-heh-heh ha
08 Mom:    They're Chinese.
09 Shin:   He:::h.
10 Mom:    But the crackers are,
11         (1.3)/((places crackers in bowl))
12 Shin:   Hu:::h
13 Mom:    familiar.
14         (0.7)
15 Mom:    No:?
16         (0.4)
17 Mom:    Do they not look like (.)
16 Shin:   a[: : : h   Yes,  ye]s
17 Mom:       [Japanese crackers?]
18 Shin:   Yes, yes, yes.
19 Mom:    So, you can take the rest on the airplane with
20         you.
```

Figure 2. Excerpt 2: Crackers.

that the Japanese token *hee* treats the prior turn as new information. Mom then explicitly names the crackers (line 4), and Shin again treats this as news by initiating repair, repeating the name with upwards intonation (line 6). Finally Mom uses a category to explicitly identify the snack as Chinese.

When Shin again responds with the news-receipt token *hee* (line 9), Mom reformulates her initial assumption by asking Shin whether they are familiar to him. When he does not respond immediately, she further downgrades her assumption by asking "no?" and reformulates her original turn as a negative question, "Do they not look like Japanese crackers?" Notice how this turn contains a second category which becomes linked to the earlier category, Chinese, as it becomes clear that Mom believes Chinese and Japanese snacks to be sufficiently similar to be classed as the same.

However, Mom is also linking the crackers to Shin's identity, in designing her turn in a way that hearably attributes Shin with some cultural knowledge of the snack and of the word that is used to describe it. The interactants use cultural artifacts and the epistemic rights that go along with them to accomplish interculturality by foregrounding aspects of each other's relative cultural identities through talk.

A similar argument stands in terms of gender. When people meet someone for the first time, they are usually sure whether that person is male or female. That may become relevant to the conversation, or it may not. However, the category is always there and available potentially ready to be invoked through talk by either speaker, as are many other identity categories related to visual attributes like age, size or physical appearance. In the same way, interculturality is just one possible path any given conversation could head. As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) note, it is not that people:

> passively or latently have this or that identity which then causes feelings and actions, but that they work up and work to this or that identity, for themselves and others, there and then, either as an end in itself or towards some other end. (p.2)

In short, CA views identity not as something we *are*, but as something we *do*. We have seen that

participants make relevant cultural difference by orienting to identity categories in talk and through privileging themselves or others with various epistemic statuses, or what Heritage (2012) has called territories of knowledge. Mom makes it public through her actions that she believes Shin should be more knowledgeable about the rice crackers than she is. This in turn impacts on recipient design, the way speakers construct their talk based on what they know about the audience, and so tells us as analysts where and how interculturality becomes relevant for speakers.

The next example will provide further consideration of this relationship between interaction, epistemic rights and identity.

Identity Categories as Interactional Resources

The example in this section is taken from a corpus of Skypecasts— online, multiparty, voice-based chat rooms—in which participants gather to (ostensibly) practice or improve their English. This second language setting has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Brandt & Jenks, 2013; Jenks, 2009, 2014; Jenks & Firth, 2012), but a couple of observations are particularly germane to the following analysis: (1) participants in these chat rooms tend to be unacquainted, and subsequently spend a lot of time "doing getting acquainted" (Jenks, 2009); (2) since this is an international setting, much of the talk that is involved in getting acquainted pertains to differences in national cultural artifacts, often food (Brandt & Jenks, 2011). The example presented and analysed analysed in Excerpts 3a and 3b is one such case in point.

In this exchange, Mick and Neelz have been discussing topics such as sports and food. As the excerpt begins, the chat room host, Swaroop (represented in the transcript as "Swar") rejoins the room, having earlier left to eat a meal. As stated earlier, the participants' respective national and lingua-cultural identities are not of relevance to the analysis until they become demonstrably relevant to the participants. And as will be seen, some such identities do become relevant, implicitly and, later, explicitly.

After Swaroop announces to the room that he

```
01 Mick:   What was your ↑tea (0.6) what was

02         ↓lunch

03         (4.5)

04 Swar:   I think I'm- if I say you can't

05         understand what I'm had (.)

06         som:e=er chapatti and all

07         (1.3)

08 Mick:   Alright=

09 Swar:   =It's er (0.2) different (now) so

10         you don't know how=what is

11         $tha(hh)t$

12         (2.1)

13 Swar:   (Isn't that)

14         (1.2)

15 Mick:   (*) I don't

16         [know that- I've ↑heard the word ]

17 Neelz: [  I  think h:e knows what  chapa]tti [is ]

18 Mick:                                         [wo-]
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Figure 3. Excerpt 3a: Chapatti.

has returned, Mick initiates a new topic with him (lines 1-2). At lines 4-6, after a lengthy delay, Swaroop precedes his answer by stating an assumption that Mick will not know what it is that he has eaten. Mick provides a minimal response to this (line 8). After which, Swaroop elaborates by explaining that the food item in question – chapattis – are "different," which is why Mick does not know what it is. Notice that Swaroop has upgraded the certainty of his statement from "I think" (line 4) to a stronger "you don't know…

what is that," perhaps in part because Mick's response (line 8) was neutral, minimal, and did nothing to display any knowledge of the item in question. Indeed, a few lines later, Mick aligns with Swaroop's position by confirming that he does not know it (lines 15-16). However, this statement is produced in part in overlap with Neelz who disagree with Swaroop indicating her belief that Mick will know what chapattis are (lines 17-18).

This sequence has much in common with Excerpt

```
19 Swar:   You know ↑that ↓chapatti

20         (0.8)

21 Neelz: .hhhh (.) Yeah w- er- Mick that's

22        like a <tortilla> er wrap kinda

23        thing

24        (1.4)

25 Swar:   Yah

26        (1.9)

27 Neelz: Ye- u- (0.2) erm (0.4) it's like

28        naan bread isn't it

29        (8.4)

30 Swar:   Sorry how can- how come you know

31        that

32        (3.1)

33 Neelz: Because [i'm aysh]e:an ((Asian))that's=

34 Swar:          [ (****) ]

35 Neelz: =why=hehehehh
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Figure 4. Excerpt 3b: Chapatti.

2, in that participants in this interaction are seen to be displaying their assumptions about others' territories of knowledge. However, unlike in the rice crackers example, here we see a more direct contestation of a participant's epistemic status pertaining to a specific cultural artifact. It might be said then that, here, the relevance of interculturality is being constituted, but subsequently contested. Although no direct mention has been made of any of the participants' identities, Swaroop's assumption suggests to us that some kind of implicit identity work is being done. We can see that identity work is not incontrovertible, but in fact potentially open to being debated.

Swaroop's response to Neelz does continue the debate on Mick's knowledge, or otherwise, of chapattis. Instead, Swaroop displays his surprise that Neelz herself appears to know the item in question (line 20). Neelz confirms that this is the case (line 21), before continuing to describe chapattis to Mick (lines 21-22). She does so by likening it to another food item – tortilla wraps – at lines 22-23. Swaroop agrees with the description (line 25) before Neelz continues by

making another comparison, this time to naan bread (line 27-28).

Neelz's descriptions-by-comparison not only serve to aid Mick in his identification of what chapattis are, but also explicitly demonstrate her knowledge. Neelz ends her description with "isn't it?" (line 28) which displays the strength of her epistemic status.

After a particularly lengthy pause (line 29), Swaroop again displays his surprise at Neelz's displayed knowledge, asking directly how she knows about chapattis (lines 30-31). Neelz explains this by invoking an identity category, her ethnicity; she knows chapattis, she says, because she's Asian (lines 33-35).

What is particularly interesting about Neelz's reference to her ethnicity is that she had just previously contested an assumption regarding the relationship between identity categories and epistemic rights. The implication by Swaroop is that Mick's territory of knowledge will not extend to chapattis, presumably because of his ethno-cultural identity, but this is a position which Neelz refuses to accept. And yet here, when asked how she herself is knowledgeable of chapattis, she uses her own ethno-cultural identity of "Asian" as explanation. Here we can see how this "grand identity" of ethnicity can be used as a rhetorical device, a means of achieving an interactional goal.

All readers can surely imagine, and have probably experienced first-hand, how other identities – such as nationality, gender, profession, etc. – might similarly be used by the identity incumbent, or an interlocutor, in order to explain how s/he knows (or does not know) something, or is able (or unable) to perform some action. Of course, the accuracy or appropriateness of these rhetorical uses of identities can be contested. Using identity in such ways is a common feature of spoken interaction in a wide variety of social settings, and when scrutinized in fine detail, provides us with insight into how identity can be used as an interactional resource.

Concluding Discussion

Since the "social turn" in SLA and applied linguistics research (Block, 2003), it has become widely accepted that identity is a fluid, dynamic phenomena, which is neither fixed nor measurable. However, even from this position, there are a number of different approaches for the study of identity. In this paper, we have presented one such way.

Our analysis has argued that identities are locally occasioned in ongoing interaction, and shown how participants themselves work up (and potentially contest) such categories. It has also been shown that such "working up" of, or orientation to, identity category/ies is not done in a social vacuum, but in the service of some other social action or goal. The approach presented here is particularly powerful because of its empirically-grounded nature, which requires analysts to follow the participants' demonstrable orientations.

It is worth remembering that when and whether these varying identities actually matter changes on a moment-by-moment basis, depending upon the context in which the identity incumbents find themselves, and the actions they are undertaking. As seen in the first example, the interaction was not treated as intercultural as Dad, Shin and Jeni discussed ice cream and taking photographs.

While the participants in these interactions are treating some identity categories as relevant to their ongoing social activities, they are also *not* treating many other potential identity categories – for example, their gender, profession or linguistic background – as the most relevant thing about themselves at that moment. This is a particularly important point for SLA and Applied Linguistics research: In their influential critique of SLA research, Firth and Wagner pointed out that second language speakers have "a multitude of social identities, many of which can be relevant simultaneously, and all of which are motile", and lamented that "for the SLA researcher, only one identity *really matters,* and it matters constantly and in equal measure throughout the duration of the encounter being studied" (1997, p. 282). This presumption of the higher relevance of certain factors over others is clearly a problematic position for any researcher to take.

This paper has highlighted how identities can be *seen* to really matter, in specific contexts at particular moments, to the participants *themselves*, through the interactional consequences of the identity being foregrounded. In so doing, we hope to have

contributed to a growing body of research which gives the right to determine which identities are relevant to those participants in interaction who are the object of our research.

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