Afterword

Once in a while, the scholarly work of a well-known applied linguist like Bonny Norton acquires a momentous historical significance because it captures an important shift in the spirit of the times. That shift can be fully appreciated only in retrospect, and it is therefore timely that Bonny revisits her work in a second edition of *Identity and Language Learning*, published over a decade ago. On 22 April 2007 at the AAAL annual convention in Costa Mesa, California, over coffee, Bonny started telling me about growing up in the Seventies during apartheid South Africa, the horror of it, the racial and linguistic segregation, the domination of Afrikaans, and her commitment to People’s English (Norton Peirce, 1987). I suddenly understood how much personal experience accounted for the passion of a researcher’s work; it explained the perspective Bonny had chosen to explore her object of inquiry – the teaching of ESL in a country where language was ‘in transition’. Bonny’s passionate interest in issues of identity and social justice made sense in light of the brutal suppression of social and civic identities under apartheid. Her focus on investment in SLA and the forging of imagined communities of English speakers echoed the ‘pedagogy of possibility’ she had advocated given her history in South Africa (Norton Peirce, 1989). For the first time I understood the extent to which Bonny’s notion of identity in language learning was tied to the social injustices she had so intensely witnessed in her own past. For the first time, I understood that learning English could indeed represent the hope of a better, more equitable, more democratic form of life.

I grew up in the Forties under different skies, in different times. France under German occupation was no South Africa, but it had its own terrors and its specific horrors. Post-war France was obsessed with recovering its sense of national identity, and with finding a way to reconnect with a ‘hereditary enemy’ that had threatened its identity for more than eighty years. My interest in German language and literature was a way of transcending those traditional hostilities and recapturing the potential of literature to heal identities badly wounded during the war (Kramsch, 2010). But ultimately, my multilingual and multicultural family background made me less interested in issues of national identity than in linguistic and cultural subject positions. How should I position myself as a French person now
expatriated and teaching German in the United States? To what extent did SLA research inform the teaching of languages other than English? As the teaching of culture became an object of research in US foreign language education (Kramsch, 1993), I was led to focus less on identity than on subjectivity in SLA (Kramsch, 2009, 2012). Indeed, I had experienced first-hand how different languages could literally construct multilingual subjects who either hated or loved one another, often both at the same time. Attracted by such paradoxes, I gravitated naturally towards poststructuralism and found common interests with Bonny Norton, albeit from a postmodern angle. For the first time, I understood that, for English speakers, learning a language other than English could indeed represent the hope of a less parochial, more cosmopolitan form of life.

Bonny’s pathbreaking Identity and Language Learning (Norton, 2000), written at the end of the Nineties, provided a platform to talk about issues of identity in a new, narrative way. Memorably captured by the individual stories of five immigrant women to Canada, identity acquired a face and a heart. Readers could identify with Eva, Mai, Katarina, Martina and Felicia in ways that had not been possible in previous SLA research. The personal rapport of the teacher/researcher with her students/informants opened up the possibility of ‘doing’ SLA in new ways that engaged not only the linguistic and the cognitive but also the affective and the cultural dimensions of language learning. At the end of the Nineties, Bonny Norton’s book undoubtedly responded in the right way at the right time to the concerns of language educators regarding culture in the teaching of foreign languages (Kramsch, 1993) and identity in the teaching of English (Norton Peirce, 1995). But why did identity become such an important topic in SLA at the end of the Nineties?

Why the Interest in Social and Cultural Identity in SLA?

Beyond the differences in life trajectories, both Bonny and I were responding to larger historical forces that shaped our work and our respective relationship to SLA. The first was of a disciplinary nature. After more than twenty years of its mainly psycholinguistic existence, SLA research was under increasing pressure to take account of the social factors that facilitate or inhibit language acquisition. In the Eighties, advances in interactionist SLA (see, for example, the work of Michael Long, Sue Gass and Merrill Swain, among many others) showed that social interaction was essential to acquiring the ability to use language for communicative purposes – and communicative competence was seen as the uncontested goal of SLA. In addition, the translation into English first of Vygotsky (in particular Vygotsky, 1978), then of Bakhtin (1981), brought a socially grounded Soviet psychology and a dialogic
view of language to the attention of Western applied linguists. Together with others (e.g. Merrill Swain, Aneta Pavlenko, Steven Thorne), Lantolf developed the influential sociocultural theory of SLA, in which collaborative learning played a major role in facilitating acquisition (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Both interactionist SLA and sociocultural SLA lay the ground for what Block has called ‘the social turn in SLA’ (Block, 2003) and its concern for the social and cultural identity of language learners.

The second historical force to bring about a concern for identity was the large-scale migrations that occurred at the end of the Eighties as a result of the deregulation of international markets (Cameron, 2006) and the ensuing economic and cultural globalization. Due to this increased global mobility, national societies became more heterogeneous and multicultural, their sense of community became more ‘imagined’ than ever. The question ‘Who am I (as a citizen, a woman, a minority, an immigrant, a gendered person)?’ now looms large for native and non-native speakers alike, embroiled as they have been in identity politics and their struggles for recognition. Whether they are new immigrants assessing their possibilities for the future or long-time US residents assessing the changed face of America, questions of social and national identity have become more important in the last fifteen years, especially since 9/11/2001.

The third historical development to account for an interest in identity in SLA came from the advances in information technologies, the internet and networked computers at the end of the Eighties. For the first time, people could communicate online with texts, images, videos and with other fellow computer users; they could have access to hypertexts and hyper-realities; they could adopt virtual selves and don alternative identities. Today Facebook and the blogosphere offer opportunities for re-inventing oneself and for developing multiple identities in interaction with others online.

These larger geopolitical upheavals accelerated the spread of global capitalism and the desire for a global mode of communication: English as lingua franca. The transformation of English from a national language to a global language gave issues of identity a crucial importance: Who am I when I speak English? Or, as Bonny Norton put it, how do I understand my relationship to the world and my possibilities for the future? Within a poststructuralist perspective, how does the use of the English language itself construct a world that is different from the one constructed in my mother tongue? And do I want to belong to that world? These are existential questions that, twelve years after the first publication of Identity in Language Learning, still elicit conflicting answers. In fact, after 9/11 and the many wars that ensued, the role of English and the multiple identities it promises may have become more ambiguous than they were when Identity and Language Learning was first published. A look at the three highly influential concepts put forth by Bonny Norton and their theoretical sources of inspiration may give us a clue as to why this might be so.
Three Influential Concepts

It is instructive to examine the three major concepts that underpin Norton’s theory of identity in language learning: investment, identity and imagined community. All three are anchored in a social constructionist theory of the individual, the self and the nation. In line with the desire for a more socially just world, Bonny found in these three concepts an expression of her desire to reclaim the right of language learners to take ownership of English, to liberate themselves from imposed identities, and to build communities of practice constituted along lines other than the institutional communities imposed by society.

Norton’s notion of investment, a strong dynamic term with economic connotations, was to replace the traditional term ‘motivation’ in SLA. Unlike motivation, investment carries connotations of hopes of returns and benefits; it accentuates the role of human agency and identity in engaging with the task at hand, in accumulating economic and symbolic capital, in having stakes in the endeavor and in persevering in that endeavor. In the North American context, investment in SLA has become synonymous with ‘language learning commitment’ and is based on a learner’s intentional choice and desire. In this view, learners are no longer passively structured by powerful institutions; nor are they simply moved to learn what others teach them. They can exercise agency, claim their right to be heard, change perceptions and institutional prejudices, and strive to become whoever they want to be.

Indeed, Norton’s concept of identity is ‘discursively constructed’ and ‘always socially and historically embedded’ (Introduction, this volume). This means that the kind of person we claim to be is always open to challenge and redefinition with shifts in the discursive context. In SLA this means, for example, that on the one hand, an immigrant need not be the deficient non-native speaker that her co-workers construct her to be; she can strive to be whoever she claims herself to be, based on the multiple identities she can choose from. On the other hand, this new identity might be seen by others as incompatible with theirs; it might be contested and thus has to be constantly re-assessed and re-negotiated under new social power relations.

Such an uncertainty might be unsettling for immigrants who are used to relying on people in authority (the government, a landlord, a boss, a teacher) to grant them what they need, but the constant changes in power relations implied in Norton’s concept of ‘identity’ are precisely what enables immigrants and learners of English to envisage other scenarios of possibility than the realities they are living under. The communities they wish to belong to might not be those around them but imagined communities, nourished by the hopes of economic mobility associated with the English language. Imagined communities are aspirational communities that are also built and sustained, sometimes online. United by common aspirations, learners of English around the world
dream of such values as freedom, democracy, agency and power. The internet holds the promise of being born again into a better world, of reinventing oneself. It promises new and more powerful social identities by reclaiming the right to speak (as a human right or a civil right) and having one's voice heard.

These ideals are shared by the many scholars who have followed Bonny Norton in fighting against a reductionist theory of the language learner in SLA research (see Introduction, this volume). They have used her notions of investment and imagined communities to underscore the political dimension of SLA, namely language learning through community participation and global cooperation in the public sphere. However, since the first publication of *Identity in Language Learning*, the attacks against the World Trade Center in 2001, the world-wide financial crisis of 2008, the never-ending war against global terrorism and the rising gap on the global level between rich and poor have put these ideals to the test. What is the future of Norton's investment, identity and imagined communities in SLA?

The Future of the ‘Right to Speak’

To theorize the gap between the dreams and the realities of English language use in the twenty-first century it is instructive to go back to the three thinkers who inspired Bonny Norton’s theory of identity in SLA: Pierre Bourdieu, Chris Weedon and Benedict Anderson. All three fought in the Eighties against the reductionist views of their field and their work has had the impact it has had precisely because they were, like Bonny Norton with SLA research, bucking the trend in their time.

As a sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1982) fought against the fallacy of the autonomous individual. In reaction to rational actor theory, which posits the individual as a social actor taking rational decisions based on a rational assessment of the costs and benefits of human action, Bourdieu considered an individual’s habitus as unconsciously structured by the fields in which he/she finds himself (e.g. family, school, workplace); in turn, by acting according to their habitus, individuals structure the fields in which they operate. It is through this interaction of habitus and field that people gain a practical sense of who they are and who they can become. In order to be successful, ‘all participants must believe in the game they are playing, and in the value of what is at stake in the struggles they are waging’ (ibidem, my emphasis). According to him, the very existence and persistence of the game or field presuppose a total and unconditional ‘investment’, a practical and unquestioning belief in the game and its stakes. Note the use of the modal ‘must’ here. Bourdieu is not enunciating a moral imperative but rather, as a socio-logist, spelling out the rules of the game of cultural reproduction as social destiny. Bourdieu’s views on the game have a realistic edge and a survivalist flavor that echoes much of what many people feel today.
As a feminist and cultural theorist, Chris Weedon (1987) fought against innatist theories of the self. Defining subjectivity as ‘our sense of ourselves’ (1987, p. 21), she argued that an individual’s subjectivity is constructed, not innate; it is not genetically determined, but socially produced. She called this stance ‘poststructuralist’ because it eschews fixed categories of identity and embeds the construction of identity in a never-ending struggle over power. This struggle may lead to change but may also reinforce the status quo. ‘Unlike humanism, which implies a conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject, poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the processes of political change and to preserving the status quo’ (ibidem). According to Weedon, ‘all forms of poststructuralism assume that meaning is constituted within language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it’ (ibidem, p. 22). There can be no essential feminine or masculine qualities given for all times and reflected in language and the social relations which language structures. She adds: ‘The meanings of femininity and masculinity vary from culture to culture and language to language’ (ibidem). Here, too, Weedon’s views on identity emphasize a sense of ambiguity, disunity and conflict that resonates well with today’s readers.

As a historian and cultural theorist, Benedict Anderson (1983) fought against God-given, natural theories of nationalism. His well-known phrase, imagined communities, captured the fact that national identities are not the birthright of native speakers but are painstakingly constructed by the nation-state through census, maps, museums and, of course, schools, the film industry and the media. Nations imagine themselves to be limited (by national borders), sovereign (free under God) and united in brotherly love (deep, horizontal comradeship). Anderson writes: ‘Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). This style is avowedly grounded in history. By constantly rehearsing their history and remembering their heroes, nations ‘transform fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning’ (p. 11) and thereby build their own sense of identity. As Anderson memorably remarks: ‘It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny’ (p. 12). Anderson’s phrase ‘imagined community’ reminds readers today of the overwhelming power of nations to control the imagination of their citizens, both directly through political speeches and indirectly through mass forms of communication.

Discussion

Each of the three theorists that Bonny Norton drew on fought against the dangers of conceptualizing the individual as ‘master of his/her destiny’, carving his/her path to attain well-formulated goals in the future, secure in his/her membership in a clearly defined, God-given national community. All
three show that in fact the real world is messy and contradictory: individuals are complicit in playing a game whose rules have been set by powerful institutions (Bourdieu), their identities are not unitary but conflictual as they are constituted by the language of others according to social forces not of their choosing (Weedon), the communities they belong to are not natural but social and political constructs that serve the interests of the powerful (Anderson). By fighting against a structuralist view of the world, these poststructuralist thinkers opened the possibility of resistance born out of an awareness of and attention to complexity, change and paradox.

Norton’s poststructuralist thought as inspired by Bourdieu, Weedon and Anderson has been further elaborated by other researchers in the field (see Introduction), but it is now read within global geopolitical conditions that give it new meanings. For example, while the notion of ‘investment’ is now inseparable from the much quoted ‘participation and (re)construction of selves’ memorably documented by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), it is also inseparable from some of the dramatic accounts of the damage done by unbridled globalization (Heller, 2003, 2010; Kramsch & Boner, 2010). Similarly, the sharing of narratives of the self associated with the work of Pavlenko (2001, 2002), Block (2006) and others (including Norton & Early, 2011) is now also linked to the narratives of global injustices and ideological contradictions documented in Blommaert (2005) and Holborow (2012).

In yet another example, Norton’s work has inspired language educators to use electronic chatrooms, blogs and Skype technology to have students communicate with one another outside the classroom (Lam, 2006; Malinowski & Kramsch, in press; Mendelson, 2010) and telecollaboration with native speakers in distant countries (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Her narrative approach has boosted the efforts of literacy educators who are using digital storytelling to develop cosmopolitan identities among disadvantaged youth around the globe (Hull et al., in press). But these efforts are now inseparable from the critical work of sociolinguists on the neocolonial effects of tourism discourse (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010) and its insidious influence on language textbooks (Vinall, 2012). And they cannot be dissociated from MIT psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle’s devastating indictment of the internet in Alone Together (2011). In all these cases, the dream of renewed identities is clouded by the ruthless realities of economic and cultural globalization.

In the same way as the global economic, cultural and political upheavals of the last ten years have affected the way we interpret events, so has the teaching of English come to be viewed through a much more ambivalent lens than even ten years ago. The growth of critical, postmodern sociolinguistics (Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012; Blommaert, 2005, 2010; Heller & Duchène, 2011; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010; Ward, 2011) is prompting us to cast a more political light on the individual cases documented by Norton in the Nineties, and continues to impact Norton’s more recent work (e.g. Norton & Williams, 2012).
Conclusion

Much has happened in the last ten years that has shaped today’s readers of *Identity and Language Learning*. In the Nineties, we lived in a world where the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of Soviet communism, the end of apartheid in South Africa indeed ushered in the promise of freedom, democracy and equal opportunity around the world. Knowledge of English has been a strong element in the new identities that were part of that promise.

But since 2001, we also live in a world where a deregulated fast capitalism has exacerbated global inequalities, created havoc with the financial markets and increased the global competition for goods, status and power. English has become the language of the new global elites. Rather than just a communicative skill, English has become for many also a status symbol.

More importantly, for some, English has become the language not of dreams come true but of dreams shattered. Words lose much of their truth value when language becomes commodified by the marketing industry, and the right to speak becomes trivialized by the overuse of statistics and opinion polls. The political promise of the poststructuralist perspective, that was to open up possibilities by characterizing social identities as ‘multiple and contradictory’ (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15) and a learner’s investment in the target language as ‘complex, contradictory and in a state of flux’ (Norton, 2000, p. 11), risks itself becoming commodified as one more structural and controlling process that benefits those who ‘made it’ and who may no longer wish to have multiple and contradictory identities, but rather a unitary, stable and predictable one.

Identity will continue to be an important topic of research in SLA, but the notion of identity as defined in *Identity and Language Learning* is in danger of itself being redefined in structuralist terms by those who have the economic, cultural and symbolic capital to do so. Identity might then cease to be a matter of investment and imagination and might become once again a matter of birth privilege and social class. It will then be good to remember the South African origins of Bonny Norton’s influential work and the revolutionary ideals it embodies.

References


Claire Kramsch

*University of California Berkeley*

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References


References


