

## ISSUES IN LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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*Identity has become a key construct in applied linguistics over the past 30 years, as more and more researchers have heeded Norton Peirce's (1995: 12) call for 'a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context'. In this article, my aim is to discuss what I see as issues arising in identity research in applied linguistics. I start with a brief consideration of why identity has become so central in applied linguistics, before discussing the poststructuralist model of identity which has been adopted by the vast majority of researchers. I then move to consider three more substantive issues: (1) the potential benefits of a more psychological angle when most language and identity research tends to be predominantly social; (2) the importance of clarifying the interrelationship between individual agency and social structures in language and identity research; and (3) the potential benefits of including a socioeconomic stratification and social class angle in research which tends to prime identity politics (identity inscriptions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality and language), over the material conditions of life.*

**Key words:** : *Identity, subjectivities, poststructuralism, psychology, agency, social class*

*La identidad se ha convertido en un constructo clave en la lingüística aplicada durante los últimos 30 años, dado que cada vez más investigadores han seguido la llamada de Norton Peirce (1995: 12) en lo que se refiere a ‘a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context’. En este artículo, mi intención es tratar lo que considero como cuestiones claves en las investigaciones sobre la “identidad” en la lingüística aplicada. Empiezo con una breve reflexión sobre por qué la identidad ha llegado a ser tan importante en la lingüística aplicada, para pasar después a examinar el modelo posestructuralista de la identidad que han adoptado la gran mayoría de los investigadores. En segundo lugar paso a considerar tres cuestiones: (1) los beneficios potenciales de una perspectiva más psicológica en este tipo de investigaciones ya que la mayoría de ellas sobre la lingüística y la identidad tienden a considerar fundamentalmente el aspecto social; (2) lo importante que es clarificar la interrelación entre la agencia individual y la estructura social en las investigaciones sobre lingüística e identidad; y (3) los beneficios potenciales de incorporar la estratificación socio-económica y clase social en investigaciones que tienden a dar prioridad a las políticas identitarias (inscripciones de la identidad como la raza, la etnia, el género, la sexualidad, la nacionalidad y la lengua) sobre las condiciones materiales de la vida.*

**Palabras clave:** : *identidad, subjetividades, postestructuralismo, psicología, agencia, clase social*

## 1. Introduction

This article is about issues arising in language and identity research in applied linguistics, which means that in general terms it is about the state of play of this area of research. As a way of beginning my discussion, I reproduce two statements commenting on this state of play.

SLA theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. Furthermore, they have not questioned how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between second language learners and target language **speakers**. (Norton Pierce, 1995, p. 12)

[...] over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of interest in identity and language learning, and ‘identity’ now features in most encyclopedias and handbooks of language learning and teaching [...] In the broader field of applied linguistics, interest in identity has also gained considerable momentum. There is work, for example, on identity and pragmatics [...], identity and sociolinguistics [...]; and identity and discourse [...]. (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 413)

Separated by some 15 years, these two quotes are taken from articles by Norton (the first one published under a slightly different name and the second co-written with Toohey). In the first one, Norton Pierce aims her comments at SLA researchers, although what she suggests applies to applied linguistics in general, given that up to the mid-1990s, there had been little if any research in the field which either cited identity or employed it as a central construct. Following Norton’s lead, I have argued elsewhere (Block, 2007a) that early work on motivation and affect in general in second language learning often seemed to be about identity even if the term was not used: identity was “seemingly [...] lurking in the wings without ever coming out as a full-blown object of interest” (Block, 2007a: 72). Thus from Lambert’s (1972) work on motivation and second language learning to Brown’s (1980) survey of affective variables research in second language learning, we find fleeting mentions of identity.

Still, notwithstanding these early references to identity in applied linguistics, it would take Norton's 1995 paper to open up a more explicit language and identity agenda in the field. Indeed, in the wake of her call for greater attention to identity as a construct, a good number of applied linguistics researchers not only began to mention identity but they also included it as a central construct in their work. Such developments no doubt lead Norton and Toohey to assert in the more recent quote above that there has been an 'explosion of interest' in identity. This explosion of interest is evident when one examines the number of papers given on some aspect of language and identity at applied linguistics conferences; or when one considers the number of identity-focused articles which have been published in applied linguistics journals over the past two decades; or when one considers the number of monographs (e.g., Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Block, 2007a; Joseph, 2004; Riley, 2007) and edited collections (Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema, 2008; de Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006a; Lin, 2008, Higgins, 2012; Omoniyi & White, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) devoted to language and identity which have come out during the same period of time. In applied linguistics, it seems, we are now immersed in identity as researchers focussing on bi/multilingualism, language in society, second language learning and language teacher development—just to cite four broad areas of research—often include references to and in-depth treatment of identity-related issues. And this immersion, and the impression at times that "everyone is doing identity these days", leads me to some degree of soul searching about current and future directions with regard to language and identity research.

In this paper, my aim is to discuss what I see as issues arising in identity research in applied linguistics. My starting point, however, will be a brief consideration of why identity has become so central to the way that many researchers approach issues in applied linguistics, along with a short discussion of the general model of identity which has been adopted by the vast majority of researchers. These preliminaries aside, I take on the three more substantive issues: (1) the potential benefits of

a more psychological angle when most language and identity research tends to be predominantly social; (2) the importance of clarifying the interrelationship between individual agency and social structures in language and identity research; and (3) the potential benefits of including a socioeconomic stratification and social class angle in research which tends to prime identity politics (identity inscriptions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality and language) over the material conditions of life. There are obviously many other issues which one could discuss in the realm of identity in applied linguistics. I have chosen these three because they are ones which have come up in my work on identity over the past few years.

## **2. Where did Identity Come from?**

While there seems to be a general consensus in the social sciences and humanities that identity has become a central construct, the question remains as to why this is the case. Authors who have explored the history of identity (e.g., Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Taylor, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Woodward, 2002; Hall, 2004) go back to the western European enlightenment to find the roots of the current obsession with identity, citing a long line of renowned scholars such as Descartes, Locke, Kant and Hegel, all of whom explored aspects of human existence. However, as Bendle (2002) notes, the origins of the current heightened interest in identity perhaps goes back no further than a century and a half as it is part and parcel of the gradual secularisation of the populations of countries which industrialized from the mid-19th century onwards. As scholars as diverse as Marx (1976 [1867]) and Durkheim (1984 [1893]) noted in their work, industrialization processes led to the erosion of traditions and among these traditions was religiosity (even if in recent decades religion has made something of a comeback in these same industrialised countries). As life conditions improved for larger parts of the populace, there arose a tendency to value life on earth and self-fulfilment via worldly activity more than other-worldly activity.

Another factor contributing to the rise of identity has been the founding and development of psychology from the late 19th century onwards. On the one hand, in James' (1890) classic two volume *Principles of Psychology*, there is an extensive discussion about the self as *material* (the relationship to one's own body, the attachment to material objects and possessions and the emotions that go with them), self as *social* (interrelations and interactions with others) and self as *spiritual* (the inner self of intellectual activity and morality). On the other hand, in Freud's (1923) *The Ego and the Id*, there is the self at the crossroads of the *id* (the unconscious inner world of passion and instinct), the *ego* (derived from the *id*, but the socially shaped organiser and repressor of it) and the *super-ego* (the internalisation of cultural rules and parental guidance). In such work, human beings were framed not as tradition-bound pawns in a pre-ordained life-play, but as flesh-and-blood individuals with their individual life trajectories. To be sure, in James' and Freud's frameworks human beings are constrained by biology; however, they go beyond bald biological determinism as they take into consideration socialization processes and social interaction. Indeed, James, Freud and other scholars of the individual, emerging from the early 20th century onwards, changed the way that academics and lay people alike viewed the workings of the human mind. And they planted the seeds for what would eventually become the rise of individualization in late modern societies. As Elliott and Lemert (2006: 15) put it: '[f]rom Singapore to Tokyo, from Seoul to Sydney, the individualist creed of the new individualism features significantly in the private and public lives of its citizens.' I return to psychology and identity below.

Part and parcel of this focus on the self and the individual is the rise of what Fraser calls the 'politics of recognition'. For Fraser, recognition is about 'an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees the other as an equal and also as separate from it' (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 10). It is about respecting difference and diversity in the social worlds encountered by the individual on a moment-to-moment basis. The

rise of identity politics and recognition has meant advances in the establishment and development of human rights in the post-colonial and post-World-War-2 eras. Examples include the various civil rights movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, which have attempted to overturn long standing racial, ethnic and gendered hierarchies. However, as I argue elsewhere (Block, 2014; Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012), in the midst of this concern with the aforementioned hierarchies and how to overturn them, there has been a turn away from what Fraser calls “redistribution” issues, that is, a concern with the economics-based inequalities in societies based on social class positioning. I return to social class as an identity inscription below.

### **3. How is Identity Understood? What is ‘Identity’?**

In the social sciences today and in applied linguistics in particular, the default position as regards identity is to frame it as a social process as opposed to a determined and fixed product, following the tenets of what has come to be known as poststructuralism. Duff (2012, p. 412) outlines this position as follows:

Poststructuralism is an approach to research that questions fixed categories or structures, oppositional binaries, closed systems, and stable —truths and embraces seeming contradictions [...] Poststructural researchers examine how such categories are discursively and socially constructed, taken up, resisted (the site of struggle), and so on.

Elsewhere Bhaskar (2002) has described poststructuralism (although he calls it “postmodernism”) as an epistemological approach to the study of reality which, among other things primes difference, relativity, and pluralism and in general celebrates diversity; views life as a pastiche, a collection of experiences, as opposed to a coherent whole; defines the object of research (its ontology) as discursively constructed, eschewing the idea that there is a material reality out there to be taken on board; shows skepticism about, and even a denial of, the necessity to

make reference to the ‘real’ world; and often involves judgmental relativism, according to which it is impossible to provide a rationale for adopting one belief or action or practice over another.

Most work on language and identity inspired in poststructuralism adopts a social constructivist perspective according to which identity is about the multiple ways in which people position themselves and are positioned, that is, the different subjectivities and subject positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them, within particular social, historical and cultural contexts (Block, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Duff, 2012; Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011). As Claire Kramsch notes, “[t]he term subject position refers to the way in which the subject presents and represents itself discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally through the use of symbolic systems” (Kramsch, 2009, p. 10). As regards the difference between subjectivities and subjective positions on the one hand, and identity on the other, Stuart Hall succinctly noted that “identities are [...] points of temporary attachments to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 1996, p. 6). Meanwhile, James Paul Gee (1999, p. 39) has over the years made a distinction between “socially situated”, as “the multiple identities we take on in different practices and contexts”, and “core” identities, as “whatever continuous and relatively ‘fixed’ sense of self underlies our continually shifting multiple identities”. Finally, Chris Weedon (2004: 19) follows the distinction noted by both Hall and Gee of subjectivities being made in moment-to-moment activity while identity is relatively more stable, when she writes that “identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one is”.

The notion of identity as the “limited and temporary fixing [...] as [...] what one is” needs to be treated in a more nuanced way as “what one is” is surely multiple, related to the vast range of activities engaged in by individuals as well as the large number of people with whom they come into contact. One way to look at identity is in terms of traditional demographic categories used in the social sciences, what we might call



“identity inscriptions”. These include race, ethnicity, gender, national identity, sexual, ethnolinguistic identity and social class. However, it should be noted that these inscriptions are not bordered entities which can be studied in isolation; rather, they are inextricably linked in our day-to-day practices and this makes it impossible for researchers to ever focus exclusively on just one inscription, even if their main focus may be on just one inscription. This point should be borne in mind as I proceed in this paper.

#### **4. The Potential Benefits of a more Psychological Angle when most Language and Identity Research Tends to Be Predominantly Social**

While the background of most language and identity research can be found in poststructuralist thinking which is often linked to work in psychology (e.g., Weedon, 1997, 2004), researchers have tended to take a decidedly social view of identity, focusing in particular on how identity emerges in interactions as part of the day-to-day engagement in social activity, or “finding” identity in the narratives produced by individuals who have been asked to talk about this lives. However, as Layder notes in a critique of how identity had been framed in the social sciences at the end of the 20th century, “it would be a mistake to think that the self is simply a social construct and that it has only an outer texture that is moulded and shaped by external social forces” (Layder, 1997, p. 48). Layder calls this approach to identity the “social constructionist fallacy”, which he describes as “the tendency for sociologists to avoid examining the psychology of individuals for fear of producing explanations that are inappropriate or couched at the wrong level [...]” (Layder, 1997, p. 51). As a way of avoiding the “social constructionist fallacy”, Layder proposes an approach to identity that examines what he calls the individual’s “psychobiography”, that is, the “life career” which is the development of self, via activity and interaction, over time and space. This “life career” is composed of more institutionalized experiences, which are common to all individuals who engage in similar activities in similar settings, and more

personalized experiences, which contribute to the construction of what Layder calls a “unique cluster of personality characteristics and typical behaviours” (Layder, 1997, p. 39). This more unique aspect of self is seen by Layder to operate below the level of consciousness as individuals, when prompted, are not always able to explain or fully acknowledge their motives and emotions.

In this way, Layder attempts to move to a more psychological notion of identity as a complement to the more social one. However, along the way he does not ever actually specify the exact nature of his psychological theory. He draws selectively on Schef’s (1990) work on how emotions such as shame and embarrassment may shape behavior at a subconscious level, and he revisits R. D. Laing’s (1969) “ontological security/insecurity” (the individual’s need to construct and maintain a coherent life narrative). However, he does not make clear how exactly one would operationalize such constructs in research. Thus Layder’s call for an examination of what he calls the “subjective” (the psycho-biographical) to accompany the “objective” (larger social structures) is an interesting prospect, but it is one in need of greater clarification.

Elsewhere, in another critical discussion of identity in the social sciences, Bendle (2002) is far more explicit regarding what he has in mind when he calls for a more psychological approach to identity. He begins by stating that the rise of identity as a key construct is “indicative of a crisis” born from the “inherent contradiction between a valuing of identity as something so fundamental that it is crucial to personal well-being and collective action, and a theorization of ‘identity’ that sees it as something constructed, fluid, multiple, impermanent and fragmentary” (Bendle, 2002, p. 1-2). Like Layder, Bendle believes that this crisis of identity is more pronounced in sociology, in particular among those who examine the movements and settlements of people in an increasingly globalized world. It is the result of the somewhat indiscriminate borrowing and appropriation of identity from psychology, the field of inquiry which many see as its original, traditional and rightful home (see my mention

above of the ground-breaking work of James and Freud in the late 19th and early 20th century).

Bendle critiques the work of Giddens (1991) and other social theorists who have taken a “superficial” approach to identity, focusing on flexibility in social interaction and how individuals constantly adapt to ever more complex stimuli that they encounter. He argues that although Giddens uses psychological terminology gleaned from the work of Laing (e.g., “ontological security”) while in addition referencing the works of Freud and Lacan, he quickly takes the more optimistic tack that human beings manage to adapt to social change around them leaving to the side the inner self of repression, paranoia, schizophrenia, and so on. He, therefore, does not address how inner-self phenomena might hold individuals back and act as a check on their self-realization. For Bendle, Giddens, along with many other identity scholars, has systematically failed to address the psychological while emphasizing the social, and for this reason, there is a need to move from “surface” models of analysis to more “depth” models, which take the prospect of the unconscious more seriously and contemplate an altogether more pessimistic and “dark” side to human existence. There is a need for identity scholars to look more carefully at ego psychology and the psychoanalytic theories of identity of Jacques Lacan (1977). This means an examination of an inner core self which is not entirely stable, is thoroughly conflicted and is a constraint both on human development and ongoing participation in mundane activities. Including such a perspective would mean viewing identity as fluid and unstable, not just as a response to an ever-changing environment but also as an effect of emotions, such as repression and paranoia.

To date, there has been very little movement in applied linguistics along the lines of what Bendle has suggested, even if some scholars and researchers working in discursive psychology have incorporated psychoanalytical constructs and frameworks into conversation analysis. For example, Wetherell (2007) has argued in favor of bringing a psychoanalytical perspective to discourse analysis. She has analyzed interview

data and naturally occurring conversations, exploring the links between socially situated identities, emergent in interaction, and what she calls the “personal order”, which is “derived from social order but not isomorphic with it” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 668). The personal order is generative of practices such as transference, the “process by which the person animates or inflects the external world with their internal preoccupations and impersonal meanings” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 676). In this focus on the personal order, there are echoes of Layder’s (1997) psychobiography, although Wetherell clearly sees the personal order as related to psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, as well as depression and paranoia.

Elsewhere, in work on the interface between second language acquisition and identity, Granger (2004) has also argued for a psychoanalytical approach. Granger focuses specifically on the phenomenon known as the “silent period” in second language development (Krashen, 1981), during which learners do not produce language to any significant degree despite being exposed to ample input by interlocutors. She notes that the silent period has traditionally been seen either as a sign that language learners do not understand the input they are being exposed to (a deficit theory rejected by Krashen) or that they are actively processing their input as they internally develop sufficient linguistic competence which will eventually enable them to speak (a language development theory adopted by Krashen). For Granger, both interpretations of the silent period exclude what she sees as a third possible interpretation: that silence is a part of an internal struggle going on in individuals as they sort out the felt and perceived “loss” of the first language and they deal with anxiety at the prospect of an uncertain future in the second language. Granger sees parallels between what the infant experiences and what the child, adolescent and adult L2 learners experience when they come into contact with and learn a second language, as ambivalence arises from destabilization and the loss of the “love object”, in this case what Granger calls “the first language self”, that is “the self that could make itself known, to the world and to itself, in its first language” (Granger, 2004, p. 56).

Like Wetherell, Granger provides food for thought regarding the application of key concepts from psychoanalysis to the interpretation of her interview, diary and memoir data focusing on language learning experiences. Indeed, her book does represent a somewhat daring move towards the reclaiming of identity for psychology that Bendle envisages. Above all, it means bringing together the social world and the psychological world in the study of language and identity. This kind of shift in thinking means moving beyond Layder's "social constructionist fallacy" to working in an interdisciplinary manner on the multitude of questions arising around identity, subjectivity and self.

### **5. The Need to Clarify the Role of Agency in Identity Research**

Another aspect of language and identity research in need of greater thought and clarity is how researchers take on the interrelation between social structure and individual agency in their work. As the generally poststructuralist approach to identity has come to be dominant in language and identity research, an official story of sorts has emerged as regards how the interrelation is treated. According to this story, social structure has traditionally been afforded far too much importance, as the determiner (using strong language) or shaper (using more moderate language) of individuals' life trajectories. As a result, there has been a concerted effort to redress this perceived imbalance by granting far more importance to agency in research. However, if I examine individual publications based on empirical studies in which the relationship between language and identity is central (see publications in applied linguistics journals and edited collections such as Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema, 2008; de Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006a; Lin, 2008, Higgins, 2012). I detect, on the whole, a tendency to grant much more weight to agency than to structure in the making sense of how individuals make their way through social worlds. A good example of this tendency can be found in my 2006 book *Multilingual Identities in a Global City: London Stories*, which contains case studies of people from various national backgrounds

(e.g., Japanese, French, Colombian) based almost entirely on life story interviews. There is a lot of “I” in the data and although I acknowledge what are in effect structural constraints on individual actions, the general tone is what we might call “over-agentive”.

As I have argued in recent publications (Block, 2009, 2012a, 2013), the structure and agency nexus is a vexed and complicated one. However despite being “the centre of discussions of subjectivity for centuries” (Hall, 2004: 5) and “one of the most deep-seated problems in social sciences” (Blakewell, 2010: 1689), discussions of it in language and identity research are hard to come by. And where there is some attention to the puzzle, authors are generally forthcoming when it comes to defining agency, while showing no such disposition when it comes to structure. In practice, this means that it is fairly easy to find definitions like the following one for agency:

*Agency* [...] refers to people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation. (Duff, 2012, p. 414)

However, one seldom, if ever, finds a definition of structure. Indeed when writing about structure and agency recently (Block, 2013), I have relied on work dating back some two decades, embedded in the work of scholars such as Blakewell:

Structure operates in social scientific discourse as a powerful metonymic device, identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole. It is a word to conjure with in the social sciences. In fact, structure is less a precise concept than a kind of founding epistemic metaphor of social scientific—and scientific—discourse. (Sewell, 1992, p. 2; in Bakewell, 2010, p. 1695)

Sewell’s words only go so far in helping us understand what structure is. Indeed, described as a “metonymic device”, “a kind of epistemic metaphor”, “complex” and as forming part of a bigger “whole”, structure remains relatively unclear to the reader. However, I see this lack

of clarity as symptomatic of the difficulties encountered by social theorists who might arrive at a reasonably clear understanding of agency, but find that structure proves to be a far more slippery notion.

As a way of moving forward in the structure/agency debate, it is useful to consider the work of scholars like Ortner who over the past 30 years has attempted to reconcile tensions around structure and agency in the social sciences. Some years ago, she began to elaborate what she calls “Practice Theory”, which is her attempt to understand the interrelationships between, on the one hand, structures of society and culture and, on the other hand, human action and practices (see Ortner, 1989 for an early formulation). For Ortner, “the fundamental assumption of practice theory is that culture (in a broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground variable practices reproduce or transform—and usually some of each—the culture that made them” (2006, p. 129).

Ortner’s intellectual journey to such conclusions begins with the early sociology of Marx and Durkheim, and the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. These scholars are often pigeon-holed as having granted a great deal of importance to social structure at the expense of agency, although a careful examination of their work reveals how this is not entirely the case (Block, 2014). In her most recent work, Ortner’s (2005, 2006) starting point is the need to overcome “oppositions” in social theory in the 1960s and 70s, as presented and argued by practitioners at the time. One such opposition was that which existed between functionalists (the Durkheimian/Parsons tradition), with their interest in how social structures hold together and the purposes that they serve, and interpretivists (e.g., Gertz), with their interest in what social structures mean to those who are constrained by them. Another opposition revolved around the contrast between those focusing on the macro level social structures (e.g., neo Marxists) and those focussing on micro level interactions (e.g., conversation analysts). And finally, relevant to this paper, there is the age-old issue of whether human beings and their actions are determined by social

structures that pre-exist them or they are free agents who act out of self-interest and make the world around them with no constraints on their activity.

Ortner's Practice Theory is a model of social activity that includes identity formation (and, by extension, agency) and in its elaboration she draws on Bourdieu, as well as other sociologists and social theorists such as Berger and Luckman (1966), Giddens (1979) and de Certeau (1984). However, Ortner believes that there is a need in social theory to work not just at the level of agency but also at the level of "a specifically cultural and historical consciousness" (Ortner, 2005, p. 34). She explains that her use of the word "consciousness" is not intended to "exclude the various unconscious dynamics as seen, for example, in a Freudian unconscious or a Bourdieusian habitus" (Ortner, 2005, p. 34). The latter has been defined on numerous occasions in Bourdieu's work over the years: in his earlier work as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1977a: 72; emphasis in original), and in his later work as "systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action [which] enable [people] to perform acts of practical knowledge based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138).

Examining these definitions, one might well wonder which parts of Bourdieu's "unconscious dynamics" Ortner would include in her Practice Theory and which she would reject. An answer to this question can be found, in part, in what she goes on to say about subjectivity:

At the individual level, I will assume, with Giddens, that actors are always at least partially 'knowing subjects', that they have some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and that they have some 'penetration' into the ways in which they are formed by circumstances. They are, in short, conscious in the conventional psychological sense, something that needs to be emphasized as a complement to, though not



a replacement of, Bourdieu's insistence on the inaccessibility to actors of the underlying logic of their practices. (Ortner, 2005, p. 34)

This statement leads me to question whether or not it is possible to keep an "insistence on the inaccessibility to actors of the underlying logic of their practices" (Ortner, 2005, p. 34) in one's work while arguing that "actors are always at least partially "knowing subjects" [with] some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and that they have some "penetration" into the ways in which they are formed by circumstances" (Ortner, 2005, p. 34). There seems to be a desire here to have it both ways: on the one hand, an act of agency is always a conscious act; on the other hand, there are socialized structures within individuals which guide them in their actions but which cannot be grasped and comprehended by individuals. Still, Ortner does a good job of reconciling the structure agency dilemma when it is a matter of showing how social structure is both constitutive of and constituted by individual agency, where she is following a version of Giddens' (1979) structuration theory.

As I hope to have made clear in this section, the interrelationship between structure and agency is a complex one and it deserves greater attention by identity researchers in applied linguistics. I suggest this not least because while most researchers adopt versions of Bourdieu's theory of practice and/or Giddens' structuration theory, they then proceed to present narratives of their informants which position them as active shapers of their realities while leaving behind more explicit mention of how social constraints are at work at every juncture in their activity. This tendency is curious when, as I noted above, the general poststructuralist approach to identity is overwhelmingly social in nature. However, I believe it exists because so much identity research focuses on individual case studies and the struggles and conflicts engaged in by individuals as they strive to obtain sufficient cultural and social capital which in turn allows them to be considered legitimized interlocutors and validated denizens in their new environments. To my mind, the case study is an effective methodology; however, via it, analysis needs to be carried out via an approach to

identity, subjectivities and agency which does not move structure to a secondary plane. And this is the challenge for future identity research in applied linguistics.

## **6. The Missing Socioeconomic Stratification and Social Class Angle**

Social stratification is concerned with the patterning of inequality and its enduring consequences on the lives of those who experience it. All of us live within pre-existing relations of unequal power, status or economic resources; and these unequal relations surround and constrain us, providing the context of our interactions, inevitably affecting the choices we make in life, opening some channels of opportunity, and closing off others. This is a condition of social life [...], but stratification is concerned with how some have more freedom than others. [...] the point of stratification analysis is to see how [...] inequalities persist and endure- over lifetimes and between generations. [...] the study of stratification is [...] the study of how inequalities between individuals at any given point in time are reproduced between and across generations. (Bottero, 2005, p. 3)

In this way, Wendy Bottero begins her monograph on social division and inequality as key components of social stratification. Important here is Bottero's position that the study of stratification is about how social division and inequality exist in long-term form, although their continuous reproduction is the here and now in the form of activities taking place "at any given point in time." In parallel to this temporal dimension there is the fact that stratification is, in effect, a "big structure", which is made in the minutest of localized activity. Indeed, this is one of the paradoxes of research in the social sciences, that is how to theorize, research and discuss the bigger picture of social reality via our engagements with momentary, often fleeting and small scale captures of that reality, all of which amount to what researchers are physically and psychologically able to deal with in their field and laboratory-based work.

Elsewhere, David Grusky and Manwai Ku (2008) address the issue of why in recent years there has been an increase in the amount of

attention to stratification, usually via a focus on inequality, both in public and academic realms of contemporary societies. First of all, since the mid-1970s there has been a general trend towards greater inequality in those parts of the world where the previous three decades had seen a narrowing of inequality. I refer here to how in Western Europe, North America and other parts of the economically-advanced world, a certain social democratic consensus, dominant from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s, has been overturned or seriously eroded. The neoliberal economic policies and practices, which came to prominence in the 1980s, have generated social and political changes which have brought with them greater differences between the rich and the poor and the weakening of the traditional middle class (Dorling, 2011; Harvey, 2005, 2010; Lansley, 2012).

A second reason why there has been an increase in the amount of attention to stratification is the persistent presence of non-economic forms of inequality, such as racism and discrimination on religious grounds, and this despite efforts by governments, groups and individuals in many parts of the world to eradicate discrimination and segregation along these lines. There has also been a growing realization among members of societies that the persistence and growth of inequality brings with it a long list of collateral negative effects, such as an increase in ill-health, less political participation by citizens, rising criminal activity and so on (Dorling, 2011, 2012).

Finally, relating to this realization, there has been a rise of a certain social consciousness, above all a belief in universal human rights, which has meant that an increasing number of individuals and groups simply see inequality as a social ill in need of eradication. In the midst of this rising concern about inequality, social class, as a key construct in research, has made something of a comeback. It is therefore useful to examine how what we might understand it to be about.

The economic base of social class is associated with Marx and Engels's writings although as has been noted by author such as Wright

(1985), Marx never actually provided a clear-cut definition of class, dying just when he was about to do so in the unfinished third volume of *Capital*. But in his work, there is always something about individuals, families and collectives' relationships to the means of production and their differentiated forms of life vis-à-vis other class members and classes. Thus, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes that “[i]n so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class” (Marx 1972, p. 515). However for more clearly and directly formulated definitions of class, we must turn to Marxist scholars. The following definition was written by Vladimir Lenin, in his adaptation of Marxism to Russian realities of the early 20th century:

Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definitive system of social economy (Lenin, 1947 [1919], p.492)

Notwithstanding the accuracy of Lenin's description of class for the context and times in which he lived, a range of more recent scholars have noted that any conceptualization of the construct must be consonant with the increasing complexification of societies since Marx's death some 130 years ago. Max Weber (1968 [1924]) has traditionally been seen as the sociologist who reconfigured class in the light of changes taking place in European industrialized societies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Similar to Marx, Weber wrote about an economic order in industrialized societies, an order which led to the differentiated class positions of individuals and groups. He also noted how class and class position are relational and only made sense as analytical frameworks where and

when individuals and groups interact as they engage in social activity. However, Weber's notion of what constituted this economic order differed sharply from Marx's: while Marx saw the economic order in terms of the relationships between capital and labour power, leading to the exploitation of the latter by the former, Weber viewed the economic order as a market in which stratification and inequality arose in the exchange of assets by individuals with unequal access to and possession of these assets. For Weber, "[c]lass situation' and 'class' refer only to the same (or similar) interests which an individual shares with others", which include "the various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills which constitute a particular class situation" (Weber 1968, p. 302). His view of class was therefore not just about production (see Marx), but also about economic exchange occurring after production (i.e., consumption).

This is a more cultural view of class than that formulated by Marx, although it would be an error to see Marxism as devoid of a social dimension. It is also a view of economics which articulates well with a second key construct in Weberian sociology, status. Weber introduced the notions of status and status situation as a way of making sense of inequality and stratification in industrialized societies not only in terms of material conditions (economics), but also in terms of more abstract, socially constructed phenomena such as honour, prestige and social practices. The latter include activities such as the consumption of particular goods and engagement in particular pastimes, both related to differentiable lifestyles which are valued unequally in societies in terms of what Weber (1968) called "prestige" and what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) called "distinction".

Drawing on Marxism to an extent, but far more influenced by Weber, Bourdieu is perhaps the social theorist who best captured what class had become in the wealthy west by the end of the 20th century. Like Weber, Bourdieu saw class as based in material states and processes (see his "economic capital") but also as emergent in cultural activity. In the following quote, he states his position clearly:

[...] class or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production, as identified through indices such as occupation, income, or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated (this is the case with ethnic origin and sex). A number of official criteria: for example, the requiring of a given diploma can be a way of demanding a particular social origin. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 102)

In this mix, there are capitals beyond economic capital. On the one hand, there is cultural capital, in shorthand the possession of legitimized knowledge and knowhow, which might be transformed creatively and generatively into sub-capitals or derived capitals such “educational capital”, “linguistic capital”, “artistic capital” and so on. On the other hand, there is social capital, seen as the use to which cultural (and economic) capital is put in the form of power derived from particular social relations which facilitate paths to success in some individuals’ life trajectories. For Bourdieu, capitals can be quantified or spoken of in terms of degrees and volumes, the latter “understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers-economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital” (Bourdieu, 1984:, p. 114). Importantly, one sees how capital is distributed differentially across individuals engaging in practices across a variety of fields, which are domains of social practices constituted and shaped by particular ways of thinking and acting (e.g., education, football, cinema, etc.).

As I note elsewhere (Block, 2012b, 2014; Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012), a perusal of publications about social class over the last thirty years (e.g., Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal & Wright, 2009; Bottero, 2005; Crompton, 2008; Savage, 2000) reveals a strong (though by no means exclusive) tendency to frame the construct in a Bourdieusian manner. Thus social class is not just about income and education, or income and occupation; rather, it has become a convenient

working label for a number of dimensions which overlap and are interrelated. These dimensions include: wealth (an individual's possessions and disposable money); occupation (manual labor, unskilled service jobs, low-level information-based jobs, professional labor, etc.); place of residence (a working-class neighborhood, a middle-class neighborhood, an area in process of gentrification), education (the educational level attained by an individual by early adulthood); social networking (middle-class people tend to socialize with middle-class people, working-class people with working-class people, and so on); consumption patterns (buying food at a supermarket that positions itself as "cost-cutting" vs. buying food at one that sells "healthy" and organic products); and symbolic behavior (e.g. how one moves one's body, the clothes one wears, the way one speaks, how one eats, the kinds of pastimes one engages in, etc.).

Social class, understood either partially or fully in this way, has had a checkered history in applied linguistics. In early variationist sociolinguistics, in particular the work of Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1974), social class was understood as something preceding and generating linguistic differences such as accent, syntax and lexis. More recently, Ramp-ton (2006, 2010) has brought social class back into the mainstream in sociolinguistics, as he has examined contrasted uses of posh and cockney English among working-class secondary school students in London. Other scholars have also continued a tradition of examining not only how particular features of spoken language index social class but also how a range of semiotic forms do so. Thus, in the UK, there has been extensive research on accents in London (Cheshire, Fox, Kerswill, & Torgersen, 2008) and other parts of the UK (Moore, 2010; Snell, 2013). Meanwhile, in work more specifically about language and identity, Norton (2000) has focused on the class positions of female immigrants in Canada and, in my own work, I have brought in a class analysis in my work on migrants in London (e.g. Block, 2006a). However, in my most recent work (Block, 2014), I make the point that in applied linguistics there has been far too little work on how the social class dimensions outlined above interrelate

with each other, and above all, how they interrelate with identity and language learning and use.

Something of an exception in this regard is Pichler's (2009) work which focuses on the construction of gendered identities among female secondary-school students in London, and how these gendered identities intersect with social class and race. Pichler draws on earlier work in sociology on gender, social class and race (e.g., Skeggs, 1997, 2004) as she focuses on three cohorts: "cool and socially aware private-school girls"; "sheltered but independent East End girls"; and "tough and respectable British-Bangladeshi girls". While the first group was made up of four distinctly upper middle-class girls, the latter two groups were working class in composition in terms of family income, family dwelling, neighborhood, parenting at home, the kinds of activities that they engaged in and the kind of talk that they produced.

The private-school girls positioned themselves in multiple domains of activities ranging from their studies to music and sex. Pichler found these girls to be more overtly aware of social class than the girls in the other two cohorts, which contradicts the notion that social class is relatively invisible amongst those who occupy higher positions in society and a far greater preoccupation amongst those at the lower end of society. Pichler sums up the way that social class is indexed in what the girls choose to talk about and how they talk about it:

Their talk about poems and mines, dance clubs and their clientele, London's West and East End, state-school students, A-levels and future university degrees, and public perception of 'over-privileged' private school girls indexes social class both directly and indirectly via 'cultural concepts' (Silverstein, 2004), and cultural tastes and capital (Bourdieu, 1984). (Pichler, 2009, p. 61)

The sheltered girls manifested "an (unexpressed) awareness of a range of pathologizing discourses about working-class adolescents and families, especially about single mothers" (Pichler, 2009: 65), which they "disidentified" with. Instead, they positioned themselves as "respect-



able”, and further to this “sheltered”, that is, as living under the constant vigilance and care of their single mothers (and, as Pichler notes, their absent fathers). Ultimately, they came across as “responsible with regard to their schooling/education, boyfriends and sexual experiences and as compliant with the mostly strict but loving parenting they experience at home” (Pichler, 2009, p. 65). Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi girls achieved the toughness which Pichler attributes to them “by the adoption of anti-school and taunting stances [...] and [...] verbal challenges and insults in the form of teasing and boasting” (Pichler, 2009, p. 109), all practices “that appear influenced by ideologies of and norms of British lad(ette)/working class culture” (Pichler, 2009, p. 147).

To conclude, research of this kind shows a way forward for those interested in language and identity as it integrates a social class-based analysis into discussions of what are two of the most researched identity inscriptions, race and gender. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while Pichler does a good job of making clear the intersection of social class with race and gender, she does not, to my mind, go far enough, and to some extent leaves social class as an add-on to more important issues arising in race and gender in society. In this sense, situating social class as a central construct in language and identity research remains an unrealized though promising avenue for future researchers to follow.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed issues arising as I have thought about and researched language and identity over the years: (1) The potential benefits of a more psychological angle when most language and identity research tends to be predominantly social (Block, 2006b, 2007a, 2009); (2) the importance of clarifying the interrelationship between individual agency and social structures in language and identity research (Block, 2009, 2012a, 2013); and (3) the potential benefits of including a socioeconomic stratification and social class angle in research which

tends to prime identity politics over the material conditions of life (Block, 2007a, 2012b, 2014; Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012). In all these discussions, questions arise as regards the viability of a poststructuralist approach to identity. A psychological approach leads us to the notion of a core inner-self which is posited as having universal propensities and a lived individual history which it has shaped. Somewhat marginalized in such an approach is the notion of an identity which is made entirely on a moment-to-moment basis as the inner core self is framed as stable at least to some extent. Meanwhile, an argument in favor of the importance of social structures in shaping and constraining individual agency depends on the notion that there is some stability in said social structures and that not all aspects of identity are up for negotiation at any given moment. Finally, any approach to identity which draws on political economy and examines social stratification and social class necessarily depends on a notion of social structures as stable. Thus, embedded in my discussion in the latter three sections of this article is a critique of the poststructuralist approach which, as I argued in section 2 of this paper, has become the dominant approach in applied linguistics.

In her definition of stratification reproduced above in section 6, Bottero posits social structures as the “pre-existing relations of unequal power”, which stand independent of the actions and agency of individuals interacting within these social realities. In taking such a stance, Bottero is aligning herself with a form of critical realism, which stands in contrast to poststructuralist approaches to inquiry, which, as was observed above, often frame the observed world as socially constructed to the extreme that individuals’ agency appears as the be-all and end-all of social activity (Block, 2013; Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012). Bhaskar, the chief proponent of critical realism over the past four decades, describes this approach to ontology and epistemology in social sciences research as follows:

What critical realism says is that there is no inconsistency between being [(1)] an ontological realist [...], believing that there is a real world which consists in structures, generative mechanisms, all sorts of complex

things and totalities which exist and act independently of the scientist [... and] [(2)] saying that that knowledge is itself socially produced [... and that science] is a geo-historically specific social process, [...] continually in transformation [... and] characterised by relativism, [...] pluralism, diversity, difference and change [...] (Bhaskar, 2002: 211)

Being a critical realist therefore means being a realist with regard to ontology (it is intransitive, existing independently of the activity of individuals) and a relativist with regard to epistemology (theoretical work is transitive, in that scientific experience changes, as do conceptions of the studied world). It also entails a third shift in thinking, to “judgmental rationalism”, which means embracing the notion that “even though science is a social process and that we know views and opinions change through time, at any one moment of time there will be better or worse grounds for preferring one rather than another theory” (Bhaskar, 2002: 211-212). Judgmental rationalism allows us to take action, precisely at a time when action is needed to combat various forms of regressive and reactionary politics going on around us, neoliberalism and its various economic, social and psychological permutations being a good example. By contrast, judgmental relativism, listed in section 3 as one of characteristics of a poststructuralist approach, means the inability to take sides because there are no better or worse grounds for preferring one theory to another. And taking such a position can mean inaction in the face of injustice.

In effect, in critical realism there is a general challenge to most of the characteristics of the poststructuralist approach to identity outlined and discussed in section 3, which means that there is a challenge to the thinking behind most of the language and identity research which has been carried out in applied linguistics over the past 20 years. In this sense, there is no celebration of diversity as diversity is simply acknowledged and studied. Life may be viewed as a collection of experiences, but this does not mean that we have to reject the notion of a coherent whole, of a structured narrative developed over a lifetime. There is an interest in the specificity of particular group interests, as well as individual interests, but

this does not preclude the notion of an essential unity of all human beings. Critical realism incorporates reflexivity, but with the recognition that we need a clear notion of how the self is constructed and how it develops, which means adopting some of the universalism that characterizes much of the work done in psychology in the past and present. And while there is an interest in language and discourse as social realities in a critical realist approach, this does not mean that we lose sight of how there is a material reality out there which exists independently of language or discourse. Finally, in critical realism there is nothing wrong with the “real world”, posited as existing independently of our ability to grasp and comprehend it.

By ending this paper with this brief foray into critical realism, I aim to make an additional, more general point, which is that as language and identity research becomes more and more pervasive in applied linguistics, there will be an increasing need to question, with ever-greater intensity, how this research is constituted. There are all kinds of questions to be asked and answered about the different issues which I have explored here (and many others which I have not). And while these issues might be about how identity is defined (see my discussions of a psychology-based approach and social class above), others are more abstract or conceptual in nature, such as the structure and agency nexus. And of course, there is, as I have suggested in this final section, the importance of the general philosophy behind the way we approach language and identity research, our chosen epistemology: Are poststructuralism and critical realism incommensurable?

Ultimately, there is so much to think about when one enters the realm of language and identity research. However, the potential diversity of epistemological stances notwithstanding, I note a certain sameness across most publications coming out at present, as researchers all seem to be singing from the same poststructuralist hymn sheet. This is not a good state of affairs for language and identity research for the simple reason that in any field of academic inquiry, it is time for alarm bells to start going off when everyone seems to be doing the same thing. I am reminded

of the old adage that if there is one and only one answer to a question, it is probably the wrong one. Language and identity researchers need to move away from a kind of complacency which has taken hold in the field and question what has been done up to now (and what might be done in the future) on this topic.

### Notes

1. I would like to thank John Gray for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Christian Abello Contesse for his guidance throughout the process of its preparation.
2. The discussion in this section is based on similar discussions of the same issue in Block (2006b, 2007a, 2009).
3. The discussion in this section is based on similar discussions of the same issue in Block (2009, 2012, 2013).
4. The discussion in this section is based on similar discussions of the same issue in Block (2007a, 2012, 2014).
5. Such a consensus, whereby, among other things, capitalists negotiated with trade unions and public services were considered a right and entitlement and not a symbol of state 'wastefulness', was of course far stronger in Western Europe than it ever was in the United States.
6. See Block (2014) for a discussion of the marginalization and the recovery of social class in the social sciences over the past several decades.
7. This discussion is elliptical as particularly in the case of British scholars, it would be remiss not to mention the seminal and highly influential work E.P. Thomson and Raymond Williams, both of whom brought culture more to the fore in their fundamentally Marxist takes on the conduct. See Thompson's (1980 [1963]) *History of the English Working Class* and Williams's *Literature and Marxism* (1977).
8. Two clarifications are in order here. The reference to 'mines' occurred in a conversation in which one of the girls contrasted her life, studying poetry, with 'other people [who] have gotta like ... go down mines' (Pichler, 2009: 26). Meanwhile, for those unversed in the British educational system, 'A-Levels' are 'Advanced level' examinations usually taken during the final year

of secondary school. Depending on the result, the student has more or less choice as regards the university he/she will eventually attend.

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