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Essentialism, Codification and the Sociolinguistics of Identity

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This paper critically examines the work and discourse of two American anthropologists and linguists, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, from the vantage point of an integrational critique of linguistics. The focal point of our critique is the conviction that "identities," as first-order communicational phenomena, cannot be the object of scientific empirical research because doing so presupposes that indexical values are viewed as micro-contextually determined and available to outsiders with an "insider view" (i.e. the ethnographer). As a consequence, Bucholtz and Hall's insistence that they are not "fixed-code" linguists seems little credible, precisely because, unlike integrationists, they cannot subscribe to the view that signs are radically indeterminate: ethnography of communication, after all, relies on data collection and data analysis. The integrationist, in turn, sees "identity" as a metadiscursive label used by lay speakers to cope with their everyday first-order experience: the focus, therefore, ought to be on lay (and professional) discourses about such labels.

1. Introduction: (Socio)linguistics and the "Language Myth"

Since the publication of his book *The Language Myth* in 1981, Roy Harris has launched a relentless critique of linguistics as a "science," arguing that professional linguists have deluded themselves into believing that establishing linguistic "facts" was their particular domain of expertise. Harris' criticism makes crucial reference to the "language myth" (e.g. Harris, *Integrational Linguistics* 32), i.e. the thesis that (i) speech is a form of *telementation* (a means of conveying thoughts from one mind to another) and the thesis of (ii) *linguistic determinacy* (languages are "fixed codes"). In turn, Harris maintains that (i) communication is an "integra-

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tional," time-embedded process involving many different kinds of inseparably bound and situationally contingent mental and physical activities (the strictly *verbal* component being only one of them) and that (ii) this process is "private" (in the sense that the integrational process depends on an individual's biography and is unpredictable). With its emphasis on the uniqueness of situations and utterances, *integrational linguistics* is sceptical about both universal and culture-specific generalizations.

The linguistics envisaged by Harris is thus a "lay-oriented" one, which acknowledges that linguistic "facts" cannot be reconstructed "truthfully" by an impartial scientist: as a consequence, the professional linguist's reconstruction of what was *really* uttered (or of how something was *really* understood, etc.) merely becomes a particular kind of discourse (itself worthy of attention) which is, qualitatively speaking, on a par with how laypeople retrospectively establish linguistic "facts:"

> As far as the integrationist is concerned, any linguistics worth having will be "essentially lay-oriented" [. . .] and the facts it deals with will be facts of the kind that have to be dealt with in everyday linguistic communication by those who engage in it. (Harris, *Integrational Linguistics* 146)

This is not to claim that verbal communication has no *social* component, or that individuals (and their ways of behaving) are not influenced by social phenomena: what the integrationist rejects is the idea that individuals can be categorized, by an objective outsider, as belonging to certain social groups with particular linguistic codes. This is where integrationists disagree with sociolinguists, who believe that situated linguistic behaviour is amenable to scientific observation.[1] While traditional sociolinguistics (an offspring of dialectology) is dedicated to producing descriptions of systems of varieties of languages (in the tradition of a Saussurean structuralism), and hence strongly relies on the *determinacy thesis*, more recent, ethnographically-inspired sociolinguistic work has shown little sympathy towards operating with notions such as "fixed codes," arguing instead that communication is a *cultural practice* that is best observed in micro-group activities, where the question of a shared community-wide *code* is of no consequence in order to understand "what is going on:" the latter school is often referred to as "sociocultural linguistics," and its preferred research focus lies on "identity practices."

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[1] Examples of integrational empirical studies on how speakers in concrete (social) situations establish "facts" (and the methodology adopted for the purpose) can be found in Pablé ("Socio-Onomastics;" "Integrationist on Name Variation").

The present paper is meant as an *integrational* critique of sociolinguistic (meta)theory, in particular as presented within the sociocultural framework of analysis. Our critique is directed towards the work of two American linguistic anthropologists, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, because they are strong adherents to the view that sociocultural linguistics in general – and the sociolinguistics of identity in particular – do not adhere to the "fixed-code" fallacy, or to an essentialist view of language and society (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Identity"). Bucholtz and Hall (ibid.) also claim that pursuing political interests (here defending the rights of members of sexual minority groups) does not prevent one from carrying out research on sexual identities impartially and objectively. In turn, we would like to argue that sociocultural linguistics is no different from any other branch of orthodox linguistics, in that its main goal is ultimately to establish "facts" based precisely on verbal output. What is more, we believe that sociolinguistics is not done just for the sake of "science," but ultimately has political-ideological goals, which is why its claim to "scientific impartiality" is little credible. It is important to notice that Bucholtz and Hall have already been criticized for their work on previous occasions, notably by Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (e.g. Cameron and Kulick; Kulick); however, we believe that this criticism does not go far enough, and is, moreover, inconsistent when viewed against the background of Cameron and Kulick's own work on identity.

2. The sociolinguist *qua* essentialist

Rom Harré (323) once distinguished "linguistic essentialism," i.e. "the thesis that there is something which a word *really* means" from "material essentialism," i.e. "the thesis that each kind of material being has a constituent structure, whose particular manifestation in this or that instance of the kind is causally responsible for the manifest properties of its sample realizations." Harré (ibid.) went on to add: "I take it that linguistic essentialism is false and that material essentialism is true, at least in some restricted domains as inorganic chemistry." As Roy Harris (*Semantics of Science* 65) justly remarks, this distinction allows Harré to make the claim that it is possible to discover what *x* (say, copper) really is, without claiming that it has also been discovered what the word *x* (*copper*) really means.

In sociolinguistics, the question *what word x really means* is generally treated as a question of socio-regional variation: for instance, who qualifies as a "Yankee" varies among the different speech areas and/or social groups, as investigated in numberless studies of "perceptual dialectol-

ogy." No sociolinguist, in turn, would like to claim that there is a way of scientifically ascertaining the properties constituting a true "Yankee." In this respect, there is a difference between finding out what, say, "copper" is and finding out what a "Yankee" is. But what about sociocultural phenomena like "languages" or "dialects," whose essence cannot be material (as in the case of "copper")? Again, we agree with Harris (*Semantics of Science* 65) when he says that definitions as they stand in the latest version of the "dictionary of science" *must* be essentialist definitions, including any attempt at defining "variety of language *x*" in terms of its properties.[2] Essentialism in traditional sociolinguistics has been noted, with respect to William Labov's work, both by theorists (e.g. Figueroa 92) and interactional sociolinguists (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall, "Identity and Interaction"), the latter criticizing Labov's macro-social categorizations of informants as conveying the impression that identities (e.g. "social class," "ethnicity," "sex," and "age") are given prior to actual communication, and that they are objectively verifiable and classifiable as real. In ethnographically-inspired sociolinguistic theory, in turn, identities are claimed to be analyzed in *non-essentialist* terms. Thus, Bucholtz and Hall are interested in gathering the interactional "facts" on the basis of what informants display (i.e. how they make their practices *accountable* to each other) in their attempts at claiming or imposing an "authentic" identity or when perceiving an identity as such. According to Bucholtz and Hall, sociocultural linguists merely state that identities can be "real" for certain people at certain moments, which does not mean that these identities have an ontological existence outside the contingent episode of communication, or that they exist as a stable part of a person's self.

This article takes the position that essentialism, i.e. the assumption that there is a set of properties that truly characterize someone or something as being *x* or *y* (whether in a specific context or generally), is a pervasive everyday human phenomenon: Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 499) equally "recogniz[e] the importance of essentialism as an identity tactic for social subjects." It seems to us, however, that to claim, as sociocultural linguists do, that there is something (e.g. a set of linguistic and paralinguistic properties) to which identity *x* corresponds at

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[2] Hence, what a *language name* really means is not treated by the professional linguist on a par with what an ethnic nickname ("Yankee") means: even though varieties of language have names originating within folk usage, the linguist (*qua* sociolinguist or dialectologist) believes these varieties to have an ontological existence, i.e. the "language names" have a *true* meaning (its true "referent" presumably being the native speakers of that language), which scientists can ultimately detect (or at least get closer to) as they discover new "facts" (like, for instance, the fact that Standard British English and Standard American English are not the only varieties to deserve the label "Standard English").

point *y* in time is precisely to *reify* this identity (and therefore to essentialize it), notwithstanding that the sociocultural linguist is merely taking his/her informants' perspective: in fact, the analyst claims to be in a position to say that an identity is perceived as, or claimed to be, "authentic" (or "inauthentic") by one or more interactants on the very basis that the linguistic and paralinguistic features *x, y, z* were employed during the interaction. It matters little on that score whether the analyst believes that the identity exists as such (e.g. a "social class identity" in realist sociolinguistics) or is merely discursively constructed in the *here-and-now* (as in social constructionist models). The problematic lies in the very claim that it is possible to prove that identity *x* is "real" (or claimed to be real) for one or more persons, and that the key to proving it lies in analyzing language use.

3. Reiterating the "anti-identity position" (Cameron and Kulick)

In their 2004 article, Bucholtz and Hall see fit to address some of the points directed against their language and sexuality framework of analysis by Cameron and Kulick, who espouse a desire-centred view of sexuality. According to Bucholtz and Hall, their reply to Cameron and Kulick's critique has a wider scope than merely defending the socioculturally-oriented approach to sexuality, as identity research in general is under attack:

> And although the anti-identity position is framed in terms of language and sexuality, it is consequential for the sociocultural study of language more generally. The fields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and discourse analysis have increasingly recognized that the study of the linguistic construction of society and culture requires the study of linguistically constructed subject positions [. . .] discarding this fundamental insight in any area of socially oriented linguistics could set back progress in other areas as well. (Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Identity" 472)

Bucholtz and Hall (474) reject Cameron and Kulick's critique that "linguistic research on minority sexual identities [is] concerned with the search for a linguistic code," i.e. "a distinctive way of speaking and/or writing which serves as an authentic expression of group identity" (Cameron and Kulick xiii-xiv). This kind of focus Bucholtz and Hall regard as essentialist, and concede that indeed some of the earlier studies on language and sexuality were carried out in this spirit. In turn, current scholarship within sociocultural linguistics views identity "as a variable and indexical phenomenon" (Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Iden-

tity" 474). From that it follows that Bucholtz and Hall link essentialism in sociolinguistics with the search for "fixed codes," i.e. the assumption that members of social groups share a "register" (or "dialect") which precedes actual usage: on the other hand, the description of "language use in particular contexts" (ibid.), which is what sociocultural linguistics is concerned with, has nothing to do with a view of language as "coded" and "fixed."[3] They hasten to add that terminology in the field suggesting adherence to a "fixed-code" view of language, e.g. terms like "lesbian speech" or "gay men's English," should be seen as "nominal construction[s]" expressing "the uncontroversial proposition that 'lesbians speak'" (ibid.) and – it might be added – that gay men whose native language is English speak "English". On these grounds, they caution language and gender researchers to "select their terms with greater care to avoid misconstruals and charges of overgeneralization," adding that "broad wording frequently gave rise to bitter accusations of essentialism" (ibid. 508, fn. 8).[4] On the other hand, Bucholtz and Hall *do* associate social groups with "particular ways of speaking," at least potentially, as they themselves claim:

> If "masturbators" or "wine enthusiasts" are indeed salient social categories in a particular culture that are associated with particular ways of speaking, then linguists might indeed do well to study them. (Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Identity" 478)

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[3] Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 475) profess their belief in "the fundamental heterogeneity of even the smallest social group." In turn, it is speakers who adhere to an "ideology of linguistic homogeneity," and this is what interests the sociocultural linguist, i.e. the fact that this "ideology [. . .] may become salient in social interaction across lines of individual difference." On this and similar points, see section 5.

[4] Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 490/475) highlight the term "queer" (and "queerspeak") as evidence against a "fixed code" view of language: "Queer linguistics follows queer theory in refraining from assigning a fixed, categorical meaning to 'queer.' In specific situations, the (temporary and situated) meaning of 'queer' emerges at the excluded margins of historically and culturally variable heteronormative systems. This meaning is arrived at analytically through principles established by sociocultural approaches to language, such as ethnography, that foreground the importance of local understandings and contexts." It seems to us, however, that Bucholtz and Hall still have to presuppose that "queer" has a fixed (i.e. intersubjectively shared) meaning, namely a fixed contextual meaning. Nor is it convincing to argue, as Bucholtz and Hall (ibid. 490) do in their attempt at adducing evidence that "queer" has no fixed, categorical meaning, that heterosexuals may also be "positioned as queer when they fall outside normative structures of sexuality." In fact, to argue that "queer" is not only used as shorthand for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender," but also in some cases for heterosexuals does not undermine a fixed-code semantics – on the contrary, it only reaffirms the concept of "polysemy."

Note that the linguist is not to study the discourse *about* these salient social categories, i.e. what others believe masturbators or wine enthusiasts say, but the groups themselves (and respectively, their particular ways of speaking). Again, Bucholtz and Hall do not mean to say that "masturbator language" exists (as that would be tantamount to admitting that they believe in "codes"), but rather that the sexual practice of masturbating might have consequences for the practitioners' language.[5]

Bucholtz and Hall's claim that they do not essentialize social identities (by linking them to atemporal "fixed codes") chiefly relies on the concept of "indirect indexicality." In their defense of a *sociocultural* approach to minority sexual identities they write:

> Critics have objected to researchers' analyses of linguistic features as markers of lesbian and gay identities. They [the critics] note that other kinds of speakers may also use the same features; thus, such features cannot be said to be distinctively lesbian or gay. This position rests on the fallacy that linguistic forms must be uniquely assigned to particular identities in order to be socially meaningful. A simple solution to this apparent problem is offered by the semiotic concept of INDEXICALITY [. . .] Specific linguistic forms can come to be ideologically associated with particular social identities indirectly [. . .] This kind of indirect indexicality allows for the creation of multiple indexical links to a single linguistic form [. . .] the discovery that different groups may use similar linguistic resources for identity construction, far from vitiating the concept of identity, demonstrates the robust capacity to create new social meanings from existing linguistic practices.
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> (Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Identity" 475-6)

What are we to do with Bucholtz and Hall's firm rejection of the "code view" and their emphasis on the phenomenon of *indexicality* instead? If we examine their studies with greater care (e.g. Bucholtz, "Why be Normal;" "Whiteness of Nerds;" Bucholtz and Hall, "Identity and Interaction"), it is indeed hard to believe that their conception of languages (or varieties of languages) is not one of "fixed codes." Or else

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[5] Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 477) clearly reject Kulick's (270) and Cameron and Kulick's (102) suggestion that lesbians' or gay men's linguistic practices could be compared to the "specialized registers" of stamp collectors and wine enthusiasts, thus to linguistic resources that are in principle available to *any* speaker; according to Bucholtz and Hall (ibid.), lesbian and gay identity must not be trivialized by being put on the same level as "upper class leisure activities." Understandably, the authors wish to underline that being "lesbian" is more identity-building than being a "stamp collector," however fervently one does it. But still, the question remains as to which kinds of social identity are consequential for one's language use (i.e. are more than merely superficial "expert talk"); it seems that minority group identities automatically fall in that category, while upper-class activities (being a "wine connoisseur") do not necessarily do so.

how could Bucholtz have determined that the female teenagers at Bay City High School, California, investigated by her in the mid-1990s, displayed a "nerd identity" via the linguistic, prosodic and paralinguistic features *a,b,c,* at time *x* (as reconstructed on the basis of tape-recorded material)? The features at issue are, among other ones, words assigned by her to the "formal register," as well as certain phonological and syntactic patterns, some of which are part of a variety which Bucholtz terms "Superstandard English" (Bucholtz, "Whiteness of Nerds"). The very fact that Bucholtz can make such statements is proof that she herself adheres to a coded view of language, for being able to say that for speaker *A* variant *x* is indexical of value *y* at time *b* presupposes fixity insofar as the analyst is in a position to state that variant *x* is unmistakably intended by speaker *A* as projecting value *y*, and not any other value. It is evident that the indexical value of a variant is shared intersubjectively: otherwise what use would it be to project, say, a "nerd identity" by means of linguistic features *a,b,c*, if their local indexical value (e.g. "nerdiness") could not be recognized as such by the other members of the local group? To argue that these indirect indexical links attached to linguistic features are created as part of the interaction (and are therefore not given in advance) still presupposes that they are "coded" (or become coded in a specific context, i.e. as signs of identity *y*): how else could they be recognized as what they are? In other words, the social practices that bring these indexical values into being in specific microsocial contexts must exist as abstractions in some way to be recognizable at all. Even those paralinguistic features which a traditional linguist would classify as "not system-related" (in English, for instance, a rise in pitch, a change in voice quality, etc.) must be treated as subject to mutually shared underlying rules of interpretation in the sociocultural framework of analysis. Saying that the indexical values attached to actual linguistic and paralinguistic forms are recognizable among interactants in one particular local context (and in no other) begs the question of how the researcher knows that these values are recognized as such by all interactants for whom intersubjectivity is claimed.[6]

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[6] Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 495-496) stress the fact that "intersubjectivity" is only about "sufficient similarity": ". . . much of the time what is sufficient is merely partial identification or similarity between social subjects." It must be added at this point, however, that in order to link linguistic features with a social identity as done within the sociocultural framework of analysis, there must be at least *some* overlap (in the sense of "identicality") of intersubjective interpretations of signs (or indexicality) in context that is presupposed, or else no reliable statements could be made by researchers concerning the emergence of a specific identity through features *x,y,z*. Moreover, if "intersubjective agreement" merely consists of an approximation to the same meaning, the

On top of that, by clinging to the notion of "indexicality" in their defense of language and social identity research, Bucholtz and Hall become an easy target for criticism, precisely because they conflate two quite different metalinguistic uses of the term "indexical," with the consequence that the very notion of a "social identity" becomes nonsensical: (i) *indexicality* as a feature of what is commonly called "social marker," which, being "social," requires multiple occurrences, i.e. extending beyond the single speaker and the single occasion of utterance (otherwise how could it be "social" at all?); (ii) *indexicality* as "deixis," i.e. indicating context-bound reference to a particular person, time and place, which is not socially marked (like the words *I* or *yesterday*) and refers to a single context only. Bucholtz and Hall, however, make this very claim when it comes to the indexical value of linguistic features, namely that they are "social" (i.e. going beyond a single occurrence) but at the same time analyzable only in terms of one specific local context.

4. To be or not to be an essentialist

An important factor to consider in the discussion about essentialism in language and identity research is the political dimension inherent in the programme. Sociolinguists study minority groups with the goal of contributing to the latter's "cause": for instance, showing that a "gay identity" or "lesbian identity" is not something stable but is enacted interactionally in local contexts is hardly helpful in the activists' fight for equal rights. Bucholtz and Hall ("Theorizing Identity" 476-7) themselves approve of so-called "strategic essentialism", which they regard as a "powerful intellectual and political tool [. . .] to remedy the historical underrepresentation of social groups;" they go on to add that "temporary overgeneralizations [. . .] are often necessary in the establishment of sociopolitical institutions such as research fields and political movements." It is clear that only by considering social groups in an essentialist perspective, can one succeed politically. In fact, it is noticeable that, despite everything, sociocultural linguists cling to essentializing labels to describe identities which they claim to be studying in a non-essentialist way, which is why their insistence on not being essentialists *qua* sociolinguists is unconvincing. What matters ultimately is to foreground a group as having its own "identity", and showing that this identity is not "objectively verifiable and classifiable as real," as Bucholtz and Hall believe (but a discursive phenomenon which emerges out of the contin-

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question arises as to when meanings are "sufficiently similar" so as not to cause serious misunderstandings or even communication breakdowns.

gent situation), is hardly helpful in fostering recognition and equal rights for minority groups.[7] We suspect that the thesis of identities as "fluid and situationally constructed" serves to underpin the image of the sociolinguist *qua* "scientist," who shows a concern for ascertaining the "truth" about language-related sociocultural phenomena, while not refraining from essentializing these phenomena when deemed profitable. While we do not contest the right for political action, it is not clear how a "science" of linguistics can help minority groups not (primarily) discriminated against on the basis of their "improper" use of language (like gays and lesbians).[8] In our view, it is problematic when politically committed sociolinguists profess themselves to be unaffected by their own interests as they are conducting research and analyzing data, thereby drawing a sharp line between the sociolinguist *qua* professional and the sociolinguist *qua* political activist, who – just like others – tends to overgeneralize. In our view, the political activist's sense of justice should not be confused with the scientist's quest for "truth."

A criticism raised against sociocultural linguistics in this article concerns precisely the linguist's claim to "superior insight": hence, the professional linguist knows whether an identity was (or was not) essentialized by a specific interactant. This *mind-reading ability* with which the linguist is apparently endowed is manifest in Bucholtz and Hall's discussion of sex phone workers, whose clients essentialize (i.e. take as authentic) the sexualized identity on the other end of the line, while the analyst knows (of course) that the identity is only *performed* by the worker: "Thus, while phone sex workers' performances cannot be interpreted by analysts as authentic – given that they cross lines of race, ethnicity, and even gender – their clients are not usually so *enlightened*" ("Theorizing Identity" 499, italics ours). In a similar vein, the sociocultural linguist's belief that more adequate frameworks of analysis (like the advent of ethnomethodology and the ethnography of speaking) will en-

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[7] To be sure, the "identity as fluid and constructed" thesis can be used profitably by politically active scientists as evidence that members of minority groups do not conform to the essentializing stereotypes encountered in everyday lay (including the politicians') discourse.

[8] In what way the innumerable sociolinguistic studies "proving" that the dialects spoken by ethnic minority groups are systematic (and thus just as "grammatical" as Standard varieties) have helped the cause of these groups is another question, which, it seems to us, deserves attention on the part of the professional linguists (but must involve the minority groups themselves as well). In spite of the fact that most linguists (at least all sociolinguists) would have no doubts as to the beneficial impact that these studies (and future ones) will have on linguistically discriminated groups, there are also those who precisely fear that by essentializing these groups one may actually go against the will of at least some of its members. This, however, does not mean that we believe sociolinguists should engage in spreading the "Myth of Standard varieties."

able social scientists ultimately to discover the "truth" about sociocultural phenomena parallels the position of the natural scientist, who subscribes to essentialism in his attempts at finding the "true nature" of his object of study. In language and identity research, the very focus on the micro-level of society (i.e. the community of practice), requiring an anthropological approach to participant observation, turns out to be the veritable "eye-opener." One is indeed reminded here of Rom Harré's creed (302), i.e. "the limitations of my equipment are the limits of my world."

5. An alternative view of sign-making

One reason why Bucholtz and Hall cannot accept Cameron and Kulick's critique seems to be grounded in the fact that the desire-centred approach to sexuality itself depends on a "code" view of language, and therefore on "decontexualized interpretations of linguistic data" (Bucholtz and Hall, "Theorizing Identity" 478):

> Another way in which the desire framework sets aside social context, at least in some of its manifestations, is in its reliance on the very "code" view claimed to be characteristic of research on sexual identity. In the most extreme formulation of this view, the linguistic expression of desire is represented as necessarily distinctive in form [. . .] Whereas Kulick forcefully and repeatedly argues against the possibility of associating any distinctive formal features with sexual identities, he willingly accepts the assumption that distinctive formal features attach to sexual desires. [. . .] Our own view, as suggested above, is that language use need not be distinctive to construct sociocultural meanings. (ibid. 480)

It should be clear by now that any credible critique of sociocultural linguistics must take as its starting-point the rejection of the sign (linguistic or other) as "intersubjectively shared." Only if signs are regarded as "private," i.e. as inextricably bound to an individual's personal experience with them, is it consistent to argue against the notion of "indirect indexicality," which is the key concept underlying sociocultural approaches to language in use. In other words, there is simply no way of finding out whether the indexical value I attach to feature x is identical to how the other interactants interpret it (not even if I ask my conversational partners retrospectively). Of course, individual A and individual B may have experienced the linguistic features x,y,z in similar ways (i.e. in conjunction with speakers they both regard as "belonging to social group X"), but given the uniqueness of each and every interactional epi-

sode, individuals *A* and *B* will never actualize these experiences with *x,y,z* in the same way; it could be, for instance, that just prior to a communicational episode involving *A* and *B*, speaker *A* has encountered features *x,y,z* as part of the speech of somebody who, *A* knows with certainty, does not "belong to social group *X*." There is simply no way for interactional sociolinguists to control these biographical factors concerning their informants, which is why researchers focus on a clearly delineated tape-recorded sequence, thereby treating a given episode as autonomous rather than seeing it as part of an *open-ended continuum*. Since no two people share exactly the same range of experiences with a certain sign, a "God's truth" perspective (if anything like that were humanly possible) would determine that in fact interactants (as well as the researcher) do not interpret the "same" sign (as present in the *here-and-now*) alike – it is a different sign for each of them.

In this perspective, signs are indeed looked upon as context-bound, but we see no reason why the interpretation of signs can only be *socioculturally meaningful* if undertaken as part of interpersonal communication. Sign-making does not presuppose interaction, as experiential actualization (attaching a "meaning" to a form in context) does not only concern social interaction but also self-communication and reflection. Obviously, to interpret signs in context while alone in our office or sitting at a table with colleagues requires different mechanisms of integrating the sign, namely along parameters that Roy Harris has termed "biomechanical," "macrosocial" and "circumstantial" (Harris, *Integrational Linguistics* 29).

"Indexicality" is indeed a phenomenon that each of us is familiar with from our own experience as communicating beings endowed with the gift of meta-reflexivity. While communicating with others, we notice certain features more than others, some of which we retrospectively assign to certain characteristics ("identities?") we associate with a particular person. On that score, the layperson's method of inquiry (e.g. concerning evidence that speaker *A*, "who is known to be *x*," displayed "identity *x*") is the same as the sociocultural linguist's, albeit without the aid of the tape-recorder. As a layperson I can – again retrospectively – exchange opinions with others in order to check whether they noticed the very same features and took them to mean "*A* is indeed *x*," but whatever the result of that inquiry, it is not possible to gain insight into the original state of mind of individuals experiencing the "same" communicational episode: in other words, how can the researcher claim, on the basis of "scientific" evidence, whether identity *x* was perceived as authentic (i.e. essentialized) by speaker *A*, but not by speaker *B*? In our view, the student of discourse had better take an interest in pursuing the

various "glossing practices" (Harris, *Integrational Linguistics* 76-77) resorted to by speakers to clarify their verbal exchanges.

If one adheres to a philosophy of language and linguistics along the parameters outlined above, there is no justification for language and identity research as conceived by sociocultural linguists: "identity" becomes a mere label one encounters in discourse (as used by laypersons and experts alike), which has no identifiable referent (whether existing independently of the contingent moment or not). Hence, it is simply humanly impossible to objectively observe the emergence of "an identity" by means of analyzing language use; the firm belief that this is feasible is an illusion triggered by the linguist's adherence to "fixed codes" and a simplistic view of how language and "reality" interconnect.

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