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# Negotiating Identities and *Doing* Swiss in Intercultural Couples

Kellie Gonçalves

This article adopts a post-modern approach to identity construction as multiple, dynamic, performed and discursively co-constructed in social interaction. Data collected in 2006 from nine intercultural couples, namely Anglophone women married to native German-speaking Swiss men indicate a discrepancy between implicit and explicit identity claims and see them as multiple and hybrid. The informants' rejection, acceptance and embracing of a Swiss identity based on language use and other socio-cultural practices often correlates to negative and positive assessments and stereotypes attached to the reification of Swiss as well as individuals' first-order perceptions of their stable, fixed and essential selves. Linguistic devices such as reference, adjuncts, and stance markers are used to index individuals' attitudes concerning their identities and what it means to *do* Swiss. A discourse analytic approach is taken to scrutinize individuals' first-order perceptions of themselves by considering their essentialist stances, emerging identities, and various modes of positioning within the context of a recorded conversation. Although post-modern definitions of identity are understood as multivalent, I argue that any discussion of identity should not discard the notion of essentialism since individuals more often than not discursively construct themselves and each other as stable and unitary beings.

## *Introduction*

Living in a mixed marriage can be an *intimate performance* of *juggling identities* and the *ideologies* associated with them, a dance sometimes threatening to perform as well as to behold. It is sometimes enriching, but always calls into question *deeply held assumptions* about the nature of *one's own identities*, and those of *one's reference groups*. (Breger and Hill 28, italics added)

*Performing the Self*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 24. Ed. Karen Junod and Didier Maillat. Tübingen: Narr, 2010. 75-89.

For Breger and Hill living in a mixed marriage connotes images of a close, intimate relationship between individuals as well as their ideologies or beliefs they live with and live through on a daily basis. The use of the metaphor *dance* in this quote reveals that this particular action or performance can be done privately or publicly and it is also movable. Moreover, their use of the adverb of frequency *sometimes* suggests that living in a mixed marriage is not always enriching but perhaps difficult, demanding and frustrating as well. This passage underscores the main themes in this study such as positioning, performativity, identity construction, language ideologies and widely held beliefs about one's culture. I analyze the discourse of nine intercultural couples, consisting of Anglophone women married to native German-speaking Swiss men who reside in the geographic region of Interlaken, located in central Switzerland where a diglossic situation prevails. In scrutinizing their discourse, I consider *how* and *if* these individuals come to terms with their multiple or hybrid identities and what it means for them to *do* Swiss. I analyze the various discourses produced regarding their language ideologies, beliefs (Blommaert) about the self and other, their assumptions about these discourses, as well as the cultural practices and performances they make reference to (Bourdieu; Butler; Fenstermaker and West; Zimmerman).<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I also take a close look at linguistic features such as reference, adjuncts and stance markers individuals employ to construe their assumptions and identities. A focus on these linguistic devices has been chosen since these features emerge within the context of spoken discourse.

Scrutinizing individuals' first-order perceptions (Watts et al.) of themselves by taking an ethnomethodological perspective inevitably entails being encountered with essentialist views of identities as stable or what Bucholtz and Hall have termed an "ethnographic fact" ("Language and Identity" 375). The data in this study reveal that participants are constantly positioning and re-positioning themselves as certain types of individuals who perform or carry out particular local and socio-cultural practices within specific contexts. Discourse about their past practices and thus former selves is juxtaposed to the discourse produced of their current practices, which means that any account of *doing* Swiss becomes a collaborative discursive practice. Refusing, accepting or embracing multiple or hybrid identities based on what *Swiss* means emerges as a site of the negotiation of meaning, which led to the following three research questions:

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<sup>1</sup> I understand the term practice to be the "habitual social activity, the series of actions that make up our daily lives" (Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity" 377) while performance is "highly deliberate and self aware social display" (ibid. 380).

- 1) How do individuals understand who they are as a result of living in an intercultural marriage abroad?
- 2) How is *doing Swiss* discursively co-constructed and negotiated?
- 3) How do individuals position themselves and each other in discourse and what linguistic devices are used to accomplish this?<sup>2</sup>

In a recent paper Bucholtz and Hall state that

[a]s researchers, we need to start with what speakers are accomplishing interactionally and then build upward to the identities that thereby emerge. At the same time, in order to ensure that our analyses are cognizant of the rich intertextual layers that resonate between these different levels, we need to ground our interactional analyses both in the ethnographic specificities that endow interactions with social meaning and in the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which social actors are imbricated. In short, neither identity categories nor interactional analyses alone are enough to account for how social positioning is accomplished through language; the two levels of analysis are most effective when they work in unison, and in conjunction with a focus on the larger social, cultural, and political contexts in which identity work is carried out. (“Finding identity” 154)

It is precisely “the two levels of analysis,” namely the categories-and-labels approach to identity, which considers individuals’ essentialist stances of their inherent selves as well as interactional analysis, and more specifically, interactional positioning, which is focused on in this paper. The first research question correlates to individuals’ first-order perceptions of themselves as well as their overt identity claims. The second question considers how individuals discursively construct and negotiate the reification of Swiss. In talking about Swiss vis-à-vis other national identity labels such as “American,” “British,” or “South African,” other labels such as “local,” “foreigner,” and “native” notably emerge. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet such

[r]eifications structure perceptions and constrain (but do not completely determine) practice, and each is produced (often reproduced in much the

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<sup>2</sup> Harré and van Langenhove discuss 9 modes of positioning, 4 of which I focus on in this paper. First order positioning “refers to the way persons locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space by using several categories and storylines” (20). Second order positioning occurs when first order positioning of self or other is rejected and needs to be renegotiated. Deliberate positioning is intentional and explicit while tacit positioning is implied.

same form) through the experience of those perceptions and constraints on day-to-day life. (470)

And finally, the third question is concerned with how individuals position themselves and each other in discourse by employing particular linguistic devices such as:

- reference – *nouns, pronouns, determiners*
- adjectives – *denote features, qualities of entities and their actions*
- tense – *past, present progressive, present perfect, simple present*
- adjuncts – *manner, time, indefinite frequency*
- stance markers – *actually, certainly, hopefully, I think, really*

### *Data collection and corpus*

Engaging in qualitative research means “capturing people’s stories and weaving them together to reveal and give insight into real-world dramas” (Patton xiii, as quoted in Rossman and Rallis). As a result, capturing stories and listening to individuals’ experiences, interpreting and analyzing their thoughts in the form of various discourses is not meant to be representative. I conducted informal “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess 108) with all couples, which were carried out over a six-month period from January to May 2006.<sup>3</sup> Conversations lasted between one and one and a half hours and altogether 15.5 hours of recorded material was collected. Broad transcriptions resulted in a corpus of 125,395 words which I manually color-coded and subdivided into 5 thematic categories labeled as follows:

- language choice and language practices
- couple discourse
- 4 types of positioning
- overt mentions of identity
- cultural practices

### *An interdisciplinary theoretical approach*

I draw on Bucholtz and Hall’s (“Language and Identity;” “Identity and interaction;” “Finding identity”) sociocultural linguistic approach to identity and the social psychological theory of positioning (Davies and Harré; Harré and van Langenhove). Bucholtz and Hall’s model underscores the role of interaction in identity construction and emphasizes

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<sup>3</sup> The extracts used throughout this study are from the recorded conversations.

that identity is emergent and gains social meaning in conversation, while positioning theory outlines specific ways individuals are positioned or located as certain types of individuals in discourse.

Recent investigations concerning the correlation between language and identity (Benwell and Stokoe; Bucholtz and Hall “Language and Identity;” “Identity and interaction;” “Finding identity”; Joseph; Pavlenko and Blackledge; Piller; Schüpbach) align themselves with post-structuralist and socio-constructionist views of identity as emergent, multiple, negotiated and discursively constructed and embedded in relations of power. These reject earlier accounts of identity as stable, fixed and assigned to certain social categories. Nevertheless, the notion of essentialism should not be disregarded within ethnographic studies.

Benwell and Stokoe claim that “it is assumed that although people present themselves differently in different contexts, underneath that presentation lurks a private, pre-discursive and stable identity” (3). This view correlates to earlier psychological studies that placed the concept of identity within the “broader area of ‘personality,, and viewed identity as ‘a person’s essential, continuous self, the internal, subjective concept of oneself as an individual’” (Reber 341, as quoted by Bhavnani and Phoenix 8). I understand and use the term identity throughout this study as “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall, “Identity and Interaction” 586). Despite post-structuralist and socio-constructionist approaches of identity, individuals more often than not align themselves with the assumption of pre-discursive and stable identities as one female informant, Tanya, states in the first extract from my data:

(1)

1. Tanya: you know, i’ve been here for so long and i just know that there are certain
2. things that i do different than other people do . . . i don’t know if that’s
3. american or if that’s just who i am [. . .]

From this extract it becomes obvious that although Tanya is indeed aware of the different practices she engages in (line 2), she admits to being uncertain when it comes to identifying these dissimilarities as culturally based or due to her inherent self.

For Bucholtz and Hall, “a non-essentialist approach to identity within linguistic anthropology cannot dispense with the ideology of essentialism as long as it has salience in the lives of the speakers we study” (“Language and Identity” 375-6). In other words, the notion of essentialism should not be ignored when investigating discourse concerning individuals’ identities (for a different view cf. Antaki and Widdicombe). Similarly, Joseph maintains that

[t]he analyst who refuses any truck with essentialism risks missing a factor of the highest importance in the identity's construction. In other words, essentialism versus constructionism is not as mutually exclusive a distinction as it is normally taken to be [. . .] there must remain space for essentialism in our epistemology, or we can never comprehend the whole point for which identities are constructed. (90)

Making room for individuals' notion of "having" stable identities based on who they construct themselves to be or act inherently while simultaneously scrutinizing how they are co-constructed and emergent entails fusing these two epistemological paradigms. This means that individuals' first-order perceptions of who they say they are or think they are must be considered in any account of identity. This study therefore illustrates that essentialist accounts of identity should not be viewed against social constructionist or post-structuralist accounts of identity, but that they all simultaneously work together in order to account for the complex notion of identity and the convoluted performances of *doing* identity work.

#### *Situated and situational identities*

Despite the fact that many individuals regard their identities as stable, psychological attributes as was exemplified by Tanya in extract (1), their discourse reveals that *doing* Swiss becomes an inter-subjective collaboration of social, cultural, gendered, and linguistic practices. Individuals' first-order perceptions of themselves and what it means to *do* Swiss relies on their beliefs of their past and current selves that are based on their past and current practices. In order to clarify this distinction between past and present, I introduce the terms *situated* and *situational identities* to depict the fixed, transient and ephemeral positions individuals take up or find themselves in, through and in discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Within the context of this study, a *situated identity* can be understood as a) an individual's sense of self, which is often characterized as "stable," "fixed" and "unchanged" in that it is how individuals consider

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<sup>4</sup> The terms situated and situational identities are used differently from Zimmerman's notions of discourse identities, situational identities and transportable identities. For Zimmerman all three "have different home territories" (90). Discourse identities are understood as "integral to the moment-by-moment organization of interaction. Participants assume discourse identities as they engage in the various sequentially organized activities: current speaker, listener, story teller [. . .]. Situated identities come into play within the precincts of particular types of situation [and] transportable identities travel with individuals across situations and are potentially relevant in and for any situation" (ibid.).

themselves to be or act inherently; and b) it can also refer to how they are “seen,” placed or situated by others as certain individuals within a specific context. One way in which individuals index a situated identity correlates with the verb tense used to describe themselves, which often means employing the auxiliary verb *be*. Situated identities differ from *situational identities* in that the latter is more flexible, dynamic, temporary and can be constructed by oneself or co-constructed by others. Such situational identities are referred to by individuals when they describe themselves or others as being or acting in a way with reference to particular circumstances or conditions. What is important to keep in mind is that both types of identities are intertwined and always encompass social aspects. Just because one individual situates him/herself as being a certain type of person does not mean that the depiction he or she has of him/herself is not connected to the larger social world.

Moreover, both situated and situational identities can be simultaneously revealed within a single utterance as is exemplified in the following extract between Clara and her husband Timo:

(2)

1. Clara: [. . .] that way- and also i don't like driving, i've never liked driving that
2.           much, i love taking trains, yeah, there are certain swiss things
3. Timo: mhm [or riding the bike, just walking
4. Clara:           [but my personality i think is still american

In this extract we see that Clara does not like certain practices such as *driving*, she enjoys *taking trains*, a practice she perceives as Swiss. Despite engaging in *certain Swiss things* (line 2), making reference to her *personality* as *American* (line 4), indexes her first-order perception of her self based on her inherent personality she regards and constructs as stable by employing the auxiliary verb *is*, the stance marker *I think* and the adverb *still*. According to Carter and McCarthy (144) *still* could mean that, “something is true in spite of something else or in contrast to it.” In other words, despite living in Switzerland for over twelve years and liking and doing *Swiss things*, Clara inevitably feels as though she has not changed, thus positioning her self and situated identity as stable. For Clara, her situational identity is discursively co-constructed as Swiss in several ways by both Clara and her husband. First, she admits that when it comes to means of transportation, she prefers *taking trains* rather than driving implying that since her move to Switzerland, *taking trains* is a practice she not only perceives as Swiss, but one she has willingly adopted. Moreover, her husband Timo also positions his wife as changed concerning means of transportation when he makes reference



In deliberately positioning her husband as *arrogant* (line 2) regarding learning standard German by using the past tense *was*, Conny tacitly positions herself as a willing language learner when she first came to Switzerland. Conny's use of direct quotation together with the predicative adjective *stupid* (lines 3-4) to convey her husband's language ideologies tacitly positions him as unsupportive of his wife's initial L2 efforts. This first order positioning of Peter is not accepted, but questioned when he states, *so again you put it on me that you didn't learn German* (line 6) thus calling for a second order positioning of him. Conny then re-positions her husband and herself since Peter's former behavior and attitude is presented as ultimately beneficial for Conny's current Bernese dialect performance by employing the adjective *glad* and the simple present verb *be* to index her situational identity in *I'm glad that you did that because I agree* (lines 7-8). When asked about her current language practices with her family at home, the rejection of Swiss emerges in the following extract:

(4)

1. Conny: i already feel like i jumped out of my culture! my language! my
2.           everything! to live here, i don't want my house to be in a foreign language,
3.           i don't feel comfortable enough about that, i'm not- i don't feel like living
4.           as a foreigner

For Conny language practices within her family are intentional and correlate with her sense of "having" a Swiss identity, one she ultimately rejects. She accomplishes this by deliberately positioning herself first and foremost as the spouse who has had to sacrifice everything by making reference to her *culture*, her *language* and *everything* else that living abroad entails. Furthermore, the use of Swiss German in her house is rejected as it connotes feelings of strangeness when she explicitly states not feeling *comfortable* about using a *foreign language* and thus *living as a foreigner* (lines 3-4) in her own home. Because of her past actions and sacrifices, Conny's situated identity has been jeopardized to some degree, but her determination to hold onto it is done through language maintenance. Like Conny, Glenda also rejects a Swiss identity and makes reference to a failed *plan* in:

(5)

1. Glenda: but that was the actual plan, i didn't want to live here, i'm probably the
2.           only one with a swiss passport who doesn't want it

Glenda's use of the past tense *was* (line 1) indexes that life after marriage should have been in Ireland rather than Switzerland. Her admission that she never wanted to live in Switzerland positions her as an unfortunate

victim, as a result of an economic choice. Her use of the present tense, reference to *a Swiss passport*, and the indefinite pronoun *the only one* (line 2) is a deliberate positioning of herself as an anomaly. Her utterance implies that anyone else in her position would be grateful to live in Switzerland, but she is not. When asked whether Glenda had taken on any Swiss practices, she denies it as is revealed in extract (6):

(6)

1. Glenda: but erm no, i haven't changed at all . . .
2. Michael: no- i would say it's [the other way around
3. Glenda: [no, i don't want these things
4. Kellie: what do you mean?
5. Michael: i took more on . . . of the irish way

Glenda's use of the present perfect tense in *haven't changed* positions herself and her situated identity as stable. Michael then makes a deliberate positioning of himself by claiming *it's the other way around* initially positioning himself and his situational identity as open and multiple. Employing the past tense in *I took on more of the Irish way* (line 5) suggests that his past situated identity was altered and possibly hybrid. His use of the definite article in *the Irish way*, however, indexes a certain monolithic way of being, thinking and acting, which is a deliberate positioning of himself as changed, but not necessarily dynamically.

#### *Social arrangements as a socio-cultural practice*

Reasons for rejecting a Swiss identity were based on the fact that individuals perceived themselves as unchanged, but also due to the negative evaluations attached to particular practices. One of the practices that was cast in a negative light was that of social arrangements, but more specifically making appointments to visit friends. In the next extract Glenda discusses the differences between the socio-cultural practices in Ireland and in Switzerland, which is underscored when she makes reference to the expected unwritten rules concerning friendships:

(7)

1. Glenda: i mean to go to somebody's house, i mean- all my friends- i mean, i don't
2. phone them up and make an appointment ... i just walk in whenever i feel
3. like it and they do the same you know what i mean?
4. Kellie: mhm
5. Glenda: you can't do that here either, it's all by appointment and when you don't
6. grow up that way ... it's very hard

For Glenda, making appointments is discursively constructed as different and Swiss. This is accomplished by comparing the habitual activity of planning social engagements in Switzerland to her and her friends' ways of doing things in Ireland by using the simple present tense *don't phone, walk in*, and the time adjunct *whenever* (lines 1-2). In doing so, she tacitly positions herself and her Irish friends as more spontaneous and fun. Glenda's utterance also functions as a simultaneous tacit positioning of her Swiss friends as less flexible and rigid when she asserts, *you can't do that here* (line 5) referring to making unannounced visits. Glenda confesses to the challenges faced concerning these Swiss cultural practices by comparing them to her Irish upbringing in the statement: *and when you don't grow up that way, it's very hard* (line 6). Once again, reference to Glenda's past and current practices and the respective events that have shaped her construction of them need to be considered when accounting for her first-order perceptions of both her situated and situational identities. For Glenda, the socio-cultural practices she has been confronted with on a daily basis since moving to Switzerland have been difficult to overcome. She regards these practices as tedious and regimented compared to the Irish socio-cultural practices she grew up with. In the next extract, Sarah attests similar views concerning social arrangements, albeit differently:

(8)

1. Sarah: i think one thing i used to really dislike- i still do, but i do it myself now, is
2.       the way you can't just sort of call on people, you don't just sort of pop
3.       round, "hey, you wanna cup of coffee?" you know? or have people calling
4.       round here, you phone first, you arrange a time and it has to be fixed! and
5.       then maybe you'll do it perhaps a week later

In extract (8) Sarah confesses to having a negative attitude towards the way these arrangements are done by employing the past tense *used to* and the stance marker *really*. Using the adverb *still* expresses her continual dislike to scheduling appointments, but she admits to taking it on board by using the simple present tense and the adverb of time *now* in *I do it myself now* (line 1). The simple present tense and hedges used in the utterance *you can't just sort of call on people* (line 2) implies that unannounced visits are not tolerated and as a result, not done. This deliberate positioning of the Swiss may also be accredited to the length of time Sarah has resided in Switzerland, namely twenty-four years. Because of this, she knows how certain Swiss practices work, thus tacitly positioning herself as an expert. This is apparent when she lists how this specific practice functions in a systematic way by using the quasi imperative in

*you phone first, you arrange a time* (line 4), which is then followed by *it has to be fixed!*

In extract (9) Tanya also perceives such social arrangements as Swiss, however, she intentionally chooses to maintain different and thus American practices:

(9)

1. Tanya: and i think that's something that we also do that now as a couple, on a
2.       sunday we'll go for a walk and we'll go ring somebody's doorbell and ...
3.       that's not very swiss, i mean- swiss- you have to call ahead and make sure,
4.       "hey, are we not bothering you and that?" and that's one of the things that
5.       i can think of that- that maybe ... is a cultural thing that i- that i have kept

In this extract Tanya makes a deliberate positioning of the Swiss with regards to this practice as organized and structured when she states, *you have to call ahead* (line 3). Despite her belief that this is indeed the Swiss way of "doing" things, she and her husband Ray intentionally do not abide by it, tacitly positioning themselves as flexible and spontaneous. This is evident when she makes use of *will* to refer to habitual events in *we'll go for a walk and ring somebody's doorbell* (line 2). For Tanya, such an action is perceived as *not very Swiss* (line 3) indexing that her situational identity within those particular circumstances is also not Swiss. And finally, Tanya refers to this practice as *a cultural thing*, one which she claims to *have kept* by employing the present perfect tense (line 5). Her utterance implies that some of her former American practices and thus situated identity have remained unchanged and therefore stable.

### *Conclusion*

Analyzing individuals' first-order perceptions of their identities and *doing Swiss* ultimately means scrutinizing interpersonal discourse within an intimate community of practice where the positioning of self and other constantly emerges. The analysis presented not only underscored the construction and negotiation of what *doing Swiss* means, but also revealed the essentialist views individuals discursively construct of themselves and others in and through discourse. By proposing the terms *situated* and *situational identities* within ethnographic studies, my aim was to re-conceptualize the saliency of individuals' situated past identities, positions, and practices and juxtapose them to individuals' current situational identities, positions, and practices in order to facilitate individuals' rejection of hybridity.

For the participants in this study claiming a hybrid identity is an assertion that is often met with caution and uncertainty as the dramatic 4.0 second pause and stance marker *certainly* exemplify in the final extract:

(10)

1. Sarah: swiss identity? (4.0) i don't know? yes! i mean, i'm certainly no longer
2.           completely british
3. Kellie: mhm
4. Sarah: i mean, when i'm in england, i'm a bit of the swiss person

Nevertheless, a hybrid identity is a concept that individuals living in an intercultural marriage are inevitably faced with regardless if it is rejected, accepted or embraced.

### *Transcription conventions*

,	clause final intonation (“more to come”)
!	exclamation mark indicates exclamatory intonation
?	clause final rising intonation (yes-no questions)
...	three dots indicate pause length of ½ second or more
[	brackets indicate overlapping speech
[...]	omission
XXX	inaudible utterance
()	extra information
@	laughter (one @ per syllable)
@laughingly@	utterance between the two @s is spoken while laughing
//	transcriber’s doubt
-	incomplete word or utterance

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