

Course Topic: Language, Society and Culture**Course Instructor**

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Course Synopsis

Researchers have a keen interest in the relationship between language and identity. Current research shows that there is a strong connection between our language use and language choices and our identity. In this video, we'll take a look at what has been established so far on the relationship between language and identity, as well as which questions still remain to be answered. We will start out by defining identity and looking at the different ways in which we can project our identities to the world. We will then explore the various types of identities as well as the concept of identity formation. We will wrap up the video by examining how language and identity intersect.

Course Agenda

1. What is Identity?
2. How we Present our Identities to the World
3. Types of Identities
4. Identity Formation
5. How Language and Identity Intersect

1. What is Identity?

Let's start by taking a look at the definition of identity. As with any key concept, there are many different ways to define this term. Simply put, identity is what we choose to portray to the world outside ourselves. However, if we dig more deeply, we find that there are many different aspects that contribute to the overall identity that we show to the world. These include:

- Age
- Gender
- Social class
- Profession
- Level of education
- Religion
- Geographical location
- Values and beliefs

An interesting feature of identity is that we can choose to portray different identities depending on the group we are with. The following definition ties this idea into the overall picture of identity:

“The whole sum of characteristics given by place, gender, age, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, religious orientation, ethnicity and above all, the blanks between all these, allowing people to be part of one and another culture at the same time, all depending on context or sometimes even on free choice.” - Meyer

So, identity is really as a result of a specific situation that we find ourselves in and the choices we make about how we're going to portray ourselves in that situation. However, we also draw upon everything that we are as we're making those choices about how we portray ourselves. Therefore, identity is not quite as fixed as we might think; it is fairly fluid depending on the context that we find ourselves in.

2. How we Present our Identities to the World

We have a lot of different tools available to us as human beings, for portraying our identities to the world. Some of these include:

- Personal style (clothes, hair, accessories, tattoos, piercings)
- Behaviour
- Speech
- Music preference
- Movie preference
- Sports preference
- Book preference
- Hobbies
- Houses and cars

The following groups of photos demonstrate some of the different ways we can show the world who we are.

Personal style



Profession/occupation



National/regional pride



Religious beliefs



Ethnic background/heritage



Identity development in children



3. Types of Identities

Another way to think about identity is to consider that there are different categories of identities that we can select from.

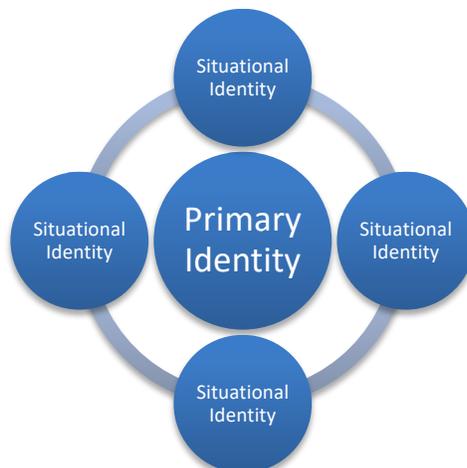
- **Psychological Identity** – how we perceive ourselves mentally and emotionally.
- **Individual Identity** – who we think we are at our core.
- **Social Identity** – how we portray ourselves in a social situation.
- **Collective Identity** – groups that we feel we belong to.
- **Cultural Identity** – cultural groups that we feel we belong to.

Researchers used to think that human beings had one single, static identity. Current research says that this idea is actually incorrect. We don't have a single identity; we have multiple identities that we can tap into depending on the context that we are in. A key part of having multiple identities is having our identities change over time. As time goes on and we have different life experiences, such as job changes or having children, we add identities to our overall collective group of identities.

Another interesting aspect of multiple identities is the potential to have identities within us that have opposing values. For example, someone could have an identity in which they are shy or reserved but in another context, that same person could be loud, talkative or even aggressive. These two seemingly contradictory identities reside within the same person and that person can choose to activate them in different situations.

In order to fully understand identities, there's another piece we need to add in, and this is a concept called Narrative of Self. If each person is juggling multiple identities, it can be very hard for that person to hold himself or herself together as a unified entity. Narrative of Self is a story that we tell ourselves internally that helps us connect and hold our multiple identities together as an integrated whole. It is essentially the story of our lives, including all of the experiences we've gone through that have enabled us to form these multiple identities.

There is another way that we can look at identity that adds an additional layer to the concept of multiple identities. This is the idea that we have a primary identity and multiple situational identities.



Our primary identity is who we are at the core. It is the set of values, beliefs and experiences that we feel defines us as an individual. Our primary identity does not change very much over time; it is our most stable identity. Around this primary identity, we have situational identities that we tap into depending on the context we are in. There are a number of relational factors that affect our choices about which identity to tap into, such as:

- Covert and overt prestige
- Ingroup and outgroup
- Saving face

We make our situational choices based on the people we are with, the context we are in and the nature of those relationships.

4. Identity Formation

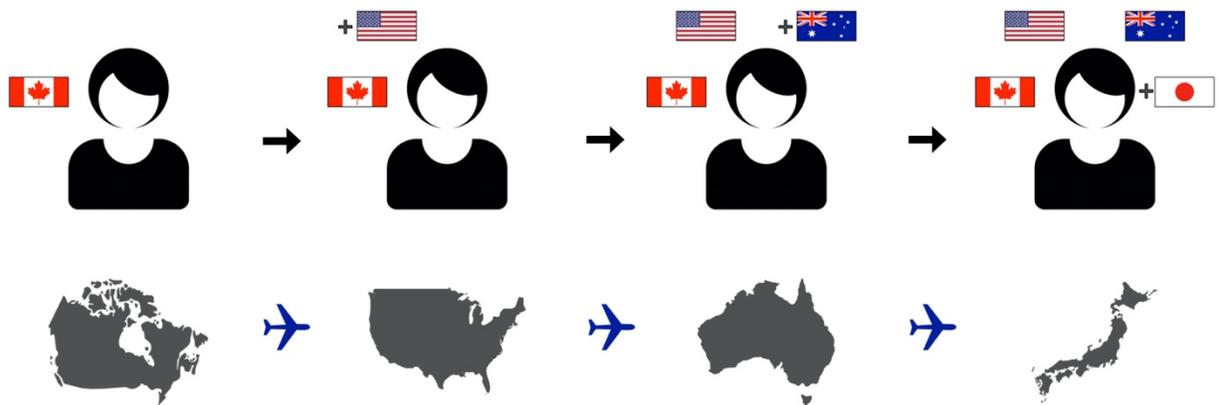
As previously mentioned, researchers used to believe that once we reached adulthood, our identity was set in stone. Researchers now believe that identity is a much more dynamic entity that changes throughout our lifetimes as we have new life experiences. Identity is now seen as an ongoing, lifetime process.

As individuals, there are some things we can control about our identities and there are some things we can't control. *Agency* describes the degree of control that we, as individuals, have over how we present our identities to the world. The word *agentive* refers to something we do have control over, for example, our clothes. The word *non-agentive* refers to something we do not have control over, for example, our height.

There are two other concepts that we need to understand when it comes to individual control over identity – Symbolic Capital and Symbolic violence. Symbolic Capital is the prestige that an individual gets by presenting themselves to the world in a particular way. For example someone who dresses in expensive clothing might expect to get symbolic capital as a result of how they are choosing to dress. Symbolic Violence, on the other hand, is the negative repercussions that an individual faces based on how they present themselves. Both symbolic capital and symbolic violence can result from strategic choices that an individual makes or they can result from non-agentive aspects of identity.

Another important type of identity is cultural identity. Our cultural identity is based upon the cultural group to which we belong. Members of a cultural group all share a common language and a common set of values and beliefs. They might also share a common ethnic background or a common geographical origin. Cultural identity is another significant piece of our overall identity as an individual.

In today's multicultural world, where people very easily can go from one cultural group to another, cultural identity gets very interesting. When we only stay within a single cultural group, we will only have a single cultural identity. Once we start crossing cultural boundaries and living for extended periods of time in other cultures, we actually form multiple cultural identities. For example, someone who grew up in Canada, worked in the U.S.A, completed her education in Australia and lived in Japan would have four distinct cultural identities – Canadian, American, Australian and Japanese.



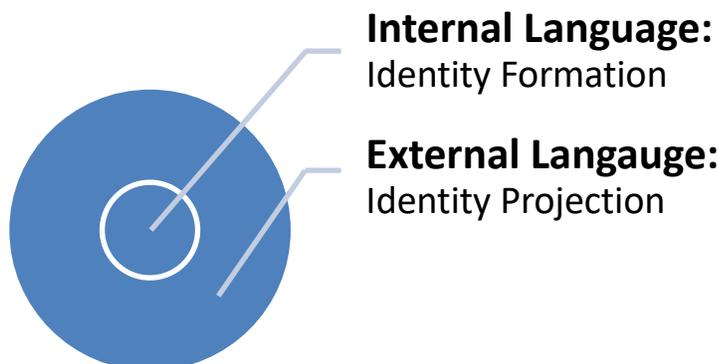
As more and more people are moving from culture to culture, our perception of cultural identities is changing. Previously, having more than one cultural identity often meant being ‘torn between two worlds’. While this can still sometimes be the case, the emphasis is now shifting to our ability to flip back and forth from one cultural identity to another depending on the context.

Don’t assume that your first cultural identity is going to be your primary cultural identity. Over time, if you spend more time in one specific culture, that cultural identity might take over as your primary cultural identity.

There is an interesting challenge with multiple cultural identities and that is when one cultural identity has a higher or lower prestige or status associated with it than another cultural identity. In this case, when shifting between different cultural identities, you are also shifting yourself in terms of power and prestige.

5. How Language and Identity Intersect

Now let’s take a look at the multi-layered relationship between language and identity. On the surface of this relationship, we use language as a tool to project our identities out into the world. This can be done either consciously or subconsciously. On a deeper level, language is what allows us internally to shape our identities. We select, both consciously and subconsciously, certain words to describe ourselves internally as we form our identities.



When it comes to language used to talk about identity, there are four main categories that we can look at:



Group Labelling

Group labelling is important because part of the language we use to talk about identity is language that identifies us as either part of a group, *ingroup*, or not part of a group, *outgroup*.

Ingroup	Outgroup
“I” “We”	“You” “Them”

Some languages have specific terms for foreigners or outsiders, for example: Gaijin (Japanese) and Gringo (Spanish). Another type of group labelling is simply the terms we use to refer to specific groups of people. The terms that we use may or may not have positive or negative connotations associated with them. We can see the political power and the connotations that are associated with group labelling in the terms we use for Native people in Canada. The first label that outsiders coming into Canada used for Native people was the term Indian. This term was not only incorrect, but it also developed an immensely negative connotation. Over time, a number of different terms were introduced to try to bring a more positive connotation to this particular group label, such as Native Peoples, First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal.

Naming

A fun area to look at when it comes to language and identity is the area of naming. This is how we choose to identify our children, ourselves, our family and our friends. There are many different naming patterns in use across different languages and cultures.

- Given name first, Family name second (English, for example)
- Family name first, Given name second (Chinese, for example)
- Single name
- Many names to capture the entire family history (Spanish, for example)
- Naming children in honour of someone
- Nicknames
- Patronymics - “The son of..., The daughter of...” (Russian, for example)

Making Introductions

There are two main ways to make introductions – symmetrical and asymmetrical. A symmetrical introduction signals that both parties are equal in terms of power.

- “Bob, this is Alice. Alice, this is Bob.”
- “Mrs. Bilinski, this is Mr. Zhang. Mr. Zhang, this is Mrs. Bilinski.”

An asymmetrical introduction signals that one party has more power than the other. This is done by adding a title to one person’s name and not the other.

- “Bob, this is Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones, this is Bob.”
- “Carol, this is Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter Scott, this is Carol.”

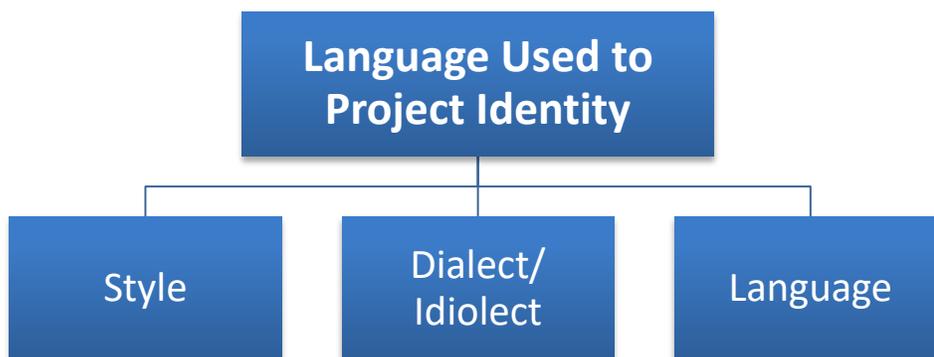
When making introductions, you can also signal the power relationship between yourself and the people you are introducing. If you use first names, it signals that you are on the same level as the people you are introducing. If you use titles and last names, it typically signals that the people you are introducing are above you in terms of power.

Grammatical Forms

Vocative forms are words that we use to call out to someone to get their attention. You can use vocative forms to indicate the power distance between yourself and the other person in the situation. This clearly indicates how you perceive their identity in relation to your own identity.

- No power distance → use first name. “Hey Bob!”
- High power distance → use last name. “Mr. Jones!”
- Low power distance → use informal term. “Hey kid!” “Hey you!”

Pronouns are another grammatical structure that we have at our disposal to talk about identity. We can choose to use pronouns that signal high or low social distance with someone. We can also use pronouns to indicate group membership or lack of group membership.



Style

Style choices can involve deciding whether to speak formally or informally, choosing whether or not to use slang, and choosing whether to use long or short words. *Style shifting* involves choosing to speak

formally or informally based on how you want to be perceived in a particular context. There are three terms that allow us to see the style shifting choices that we have.

- **Convergence:** consciously attuning your style of language to a group in order to fit in.
- **Linguistic Maintenance:** maintaining your language style in order to reinforce lack of membership in a group.
- **Linguistic Divergence:** exaggerating your language style in order to strongly reinforce lack of membership in a group.

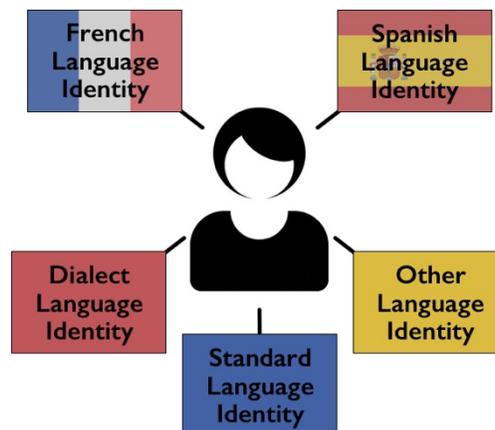
Dialect/Idiolect

Another choice we have when it comes to using language as a tool to project our identities is about which dialect or idiolect to use when we speak.

- A **dialect** is a version of a standard language. We can choose to use either a dialect or the standard language based on whether we want to be perceived as part of a group or not part of a group.
- An **idiolect** is an individual's own unique use of language that is developed over time. This often includes favourite words or expressions. We can either consciously or sub-consciously use our idiolects to express our identities.
- **Dialect levelling** involves consciously learning the standard language, and choosing to use it rather than a dialect, in order to fit in with a group.
- **Accent reduction** focuses specifically on the pronunciation aspect of language. A speaker can choose to learn how to use a specific language with native pronunciation in order to change how they are perceived by those around them.

Language

We've already discussed the fact that we can have multiple cultural identities, but we can also have multiple language identities depending upon our language choices and our language use. These language identities can be with completely distinct languages, or they can be with various dialects of the same language. Just as we can switch between different cultural identities, we can also switch between different language identities depending upon the context we are in.



There is one final concept that's really interesting when it comes to language and identity. We've already looked at the idea that when we learn new languages or new dialects, we add new language identities to who we are as a person. But the opposite also happens; when we lose a language because we don't use it enough, we lose the identity that goes with that language. This can be just as challenging as adding an identity because a little piece of us is being lost as we lose the ability to speak the language.

Putting it into Practice

We've covered a lot of new concepts in this session on language and identity. Now it's time for you to apply these concepts to yourself. Have some fun asking yourself the following questions about your own identities.

1. Which identities do you have? Don't forget to include your cultural and language identities.

2. Analyze your language use. How do you talk about identity? How do you use language to project your identity?

Thanks for Participating!

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