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# An Exploration of the Relationship Between English Language and Social Identity from an Everyday Life Perspective

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**Abstract:** This research discusses the relationship between language and identity. In sociolinguistics, the term “identity” refers to the way in which speakers convey themselves via language. This highlights the dynamic relationship that exists between language and identity. As a result, the link between language and identity will be the primary topic of this article, with a special emphasis placed on “Age” “Gender” “Ethnicity” “Class” “Nationality” “occupation” these six dimensions from the point of view of their application in everyday life. In addition, we will talk about the problem of language alteration in the setting of many identities at the conclusion of the article.

**Keywords:** Language practice; Identity; Language; Social linguistics

## 1. Introduction

Identity is a concept in sociolinguistics that focuses on self-presentation, the relationship between linguistic symbols used by speakers and their external language performance. It is often used in news reports to introduce main characters, for example, “Bill, a 50-year-old (age), male (gender), white man (ethnicity), who regards himself as from the middle class (class). He comes from America (nationality). He is a technician (occupation).” Everyone has certain identities in the social practice. The practice of creating identities cannot be separated from the use of language, making it crucial to explore the relationship between language and identity.

## 2. Language and Age

Few scholars have specifically explored the difference between language and age groups. This section explores the differences between language and age groups, focusing on young and elder language users, and analyzes their language differences using examples from online chats with UK friends.

Example 1 (age 22):

Awww/Oh nooo/Woop woop

Sad

But I love the sun

Miss the sun

Every day is grey

lol ( “laughing out loud”)

Example 2 (age 35):

Hi, sorry, I know you’re asleep but I was wondering what you are doing in summer? Like after your uni finishes, are you going straight home or staying in HK for a bit or don’t know.

Example 3 (age 18):

OMGGGGG

I HOPE YOU HAVE THE BEST DAY :):)

Is this YOU?

By taking a closer look at the above material as well as previous studies, we can summarize some common distinctions:

First, young people are more likely to use buzzwords, and short, incomplete, unpunctuated phrases with abbreviations such as TYSM

(thank you so much) /CU (see you)/TTYL (talk to you later) (Example 1) when chatting online, whereas elders tend to use long, complete sentences with correct punctuation (Example 2).

Second, young people tend to have a casual style of speech, which may even contain new self-produced vocabulary to express feelings such as “Awww” and “Oh nooo” (Example 1), and sometimes capitalizing the characters to express a strong tone of voice (Example 3), whereas adults’ use of words is stricter and more deliberate.

Third, young people are more likely to use intimate tones with friends, elders, relatives, parents, etc., while adults use intimate tones only with their children and loved ones. This may be related to the pop culture and entertainment they are exposed to (Rampton, 2017).

### 3. Language and Gender

Language plays a crucial role in identity, particularly in gender. Robin Lakoff’s (1973) article on women’s language highlights differences between men’s and women’s language, which can be categorized into various aspects.

Female language is more euphemistic and ambiguous, while men are more outspoken in expressing opinions. Men often complain about women not discussing their thoughts, leading to debates on gender topics among netizen. Men often guess girlfriends’ desires when saying “I don’t want it” or “I’m fine.”

Second, female language is more polite and less foul. This may be caused by the social environment, many girls are taught to be ladies from childhood, and society tells people - that women are a gentle and polite stereotype, so people cultivate their girls by following these “rules”. “Women can complain, but only men can roar (Lakoff, 1973).” It shows the bias towards gender language. Even today, we will assume that the girl is different when she says “shit”, while men saying “shit” have become commonplace.

Third, Lakoff’s article suggests that females have more precise descriptions of color names, such as lipstick color names. Women can distinguish different reds like “quiver,” “chili,” and “diva,” while men can only describe lipstick as “red.” This suggests that men may be gay or employees of the beauty industry, rather than being able to accurately describe each color.

Finally, Lakoff’s research (1973) also mentioned that females tend to use more rhetorical questions and complex request sentences to avoid conflicts and maintain a sharper point-of-view. Men often use simple requests like “Please turn off the light,” while women use more complex ones like “Could you please...” or “Won’t you please...” This suggests that female discourse aims to avoid strong narratives. Differences in gender identity can lead to language differences that hinder effective communication between men and women, but these differences are not fixed markers of gender and can be dynamically influenced by other factors.

### 4. Language and Ethnicity

The film *Green Book* is a powerful portrayal of ethnicity, with its protagonist Don Shirley, a pianist, struggling to fit in with the white community. Despite his efforts to learn the white accent, he is not accepted by the blacks or whites. The film prompts the question, “What am I?”, highlighting the struggles of varying ethnicities.

There is an example mentioned where a black worker calls his white workmates by their first names directly when they are communicating privately, but when another white man approaches them, the black man adds “Mr.” in front of the name of his white workmates (Goffman, 1990). This is one of those manifestations that reveals the relationship between language and ethnicity. What’s more, Jones (2015) presents a sample of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) forms queried on Twitter in his study. And we could find that there are many forms created by African American such as “tryna (trying)” “nigga (guy)” “nun (nothing)” which people of other ethnicities probably would not use. This study demonstrates how different ethnicity use language differently.

So, ethnicity is indeed an explicit feature of one’s identity, and it links closely to the language people use. Even today, ethnicity is used to filter out and judge people. The language you use is one of the ways people judge you.

### 5. Language and Social Class

Language serves as a social tool, facilitating communication and understanding among its users. Sociolinguistic divisions, rooted in social prestige, wealth, and power, are crucial in various societies. These divisions are based on status and power, forming the essence of social class distinctions. In ancient times, individuals were often distinguished by their class, such as bankers speaking differently than workers or professors speaking differently. (Guy, 1988).

How, then, is class defined in modern society? Labov (2006), in his seminal study *SSENYC*, quantified social class using a ten-point socioeconomic index based on occupation, education, and household income. The index, often referred to as the “socioeconomic class” (SEC), ranges from 0 to 9, with higher scores indicating higher occupational, educational, and income rankings. This approach allowed the researcher to quantify social class and understand its relationship to language use.

Language use among different classes is influenced by factors like occupation, education level, and social status. Social class affects

lexical choices, pronunciation, grammar, and speech patterns (Guy, 1988). Higher classes use prestigious or standardized forms of language, while lower classes may exhibit dialectal or non-standard features. Middle-class speech patterns emphasize structural sentence organization and verbal articulation of subjective intentions, while lower working-class speech patterns focus on descriptive concepts (Bernstein, 1960). Language use by different classes may reflect social identity and group membership, as individuals adopt linguistic features associated with their social class to indicate their sense of belonging.

## 6. Language and Nationality

Throughout history and across the world, it is easy to see that language has been crucial to communication, culture and social cohesion in both small communities and large societies.

Kamusella (2001) has been studying the connection between nationality and language since the medieval era. Small polities were able to survive thanks to the substantial linguistic changes brought about by the development of writing and literacy. The advent of written languages founded on modern sub-dialects made it possible for more individuals to engage in social, political, and economic spheres. Following 1848, language emerged as the central theme of the national movement, with the notion of a national language solidifying over the latter part of the 1800s. "Language=nation=state" served as the foundation for the national project in Central Europe. Throughout history, a nation's language has served as a unifying force, excluding those who did not speak the language and providing justification for territorial expansion (Edwards, 2009). Language is now necessary to improve communication and strengthen national authority.

## 7. Language and Occupation (Jargon)

Woolston (2020) draws attention to a characteristic of jargon in language and professions: it is a broad expression of terminology used in many disciplines that are understood by everyone working in that business, regardless of location. Members of certain arts, sciences, trades, and professions utilize jargon, which is a specialized language, to communicate efficiently.

Here are some of the common jargons used in different fields (Green, 1987):

IT industry: cookies (text files with small pieces of data)

Education: peer tutoring (cooperative learning)

Medical: myocardial infarction (heart attack)

Legal: voir dire (the process of questioning potential jurors)

Finance: ROI (Return on Investment)

Jargon plays a crucial role in various fields, enhancing communication efficiency and expressing phenomena more precisely. However, it can confuse non-industry readers and potentially exclude them from discussions. Professional speakers should reduce the use of jargon when communicating with non-professional audiences, especially when popularizing science articles or speeches (Lindsley, 1991). Jargon has evolved due to similar professional identities, facilitating precision and efficiency in linguistic communication. The close relationship between language and identity is reaffirmed by the collision of people with similar identities, highlighting the importance of reducing jargon usage in communication.

## 8. Discussion

Based on the aforementioned, it is evident that one individual can own several identities. Therefore, how can individuals deliberately achieve a change in language patterns throughout the process of identity transformation? A person can have multiple identities, and consciously shifting language patterns during identity transformation can be achieved through various means. For instance, in the classroom, one may use pedagogical discourse to showcase their professional identity, while in intimate discourse at home, one may use formal language to present their family identity. Academic discourse at conferences can emphasize one's academic identity. An example of this is when colleagues use nicknames with intimate tones, but when a client comes, they introduce themselves in plain tones and formal language, causing awkwardness and potentially making fun of each other. However, when conversing with a stranger, one's identity is automatically converted into a more appropriate language pattern, such as a professional lawyer or a strict teacher. This paper's focus is not on the specifics of identity transformation, but encourages reflection and sharing examples. The topic of language shift due to identity change is also intriguing, and further research is needed.

## 9. Conclusion

A person can have multiple identities, distinguishing them into different groups based on age, gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, and occupation. Language plays a crucial role in constructing social identities, as it reflects the associative meanings of linguistic symbols used in various roles. This connection between language and identity is complex and influenced by different identities.

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