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# Identity

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## A history of the area

Interest in identity in the field of applied linguistics, more broadly, and language education, more specifically, is best understood in the context of a shift from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to second language acquisition (SLA) to include a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, post-structural, and critical theory (Block 2003; Morgan 2007, Norton and Toohey 2001; Ricento 2005; Zuengler and Miller 2006). This chapter will focus on this extensive body of literature, in which researchers are interested not only in linguistic input and output in SLA, but in the relationship between the language learner and the larger social world. It will thus pay particular attention to research that has examined the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place, and how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse opportunities those contexts offer them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, language education scholars interested in identity tended to draw distinctions between social identity and cultural identity. While 'social identity' was seen to reference the relationship between the individual language learner and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts (e.g. Gumperz 1982), 'cultural identity' referenced the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group (such as Mexican and Japanese) who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world (e.g. Valdes 1986). However, as Atkinson (1999) has noted, past theories of cultural identity tended to essentialize and oversimplify identity in problematic ways. In more recent years, the difference between social and cultural identity is seen to be theoretically more fluid, and the intersections between social and cultural identities are considered more significant than their differences (Duff and Uchida 1997). In this research, identity is seen as socioculturally constructed, and scholars draw on both institutional and community practices to understand the conditions under which language learners speak, read, and write the target language (see Kramsch, this volume).

The diverse research covered in journal special issues of *Linguistics and Education* (Martin-Jones and Heller 1996), the *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton 1997), and *Language and Education*

(Sarangi and Baynham 1996), anticipated the wide range of research on identity, characteristic of the early years of the twenty-first century. Many monographs on the topic have also been published over the past decade (Block 2007; Clarke 2008; Day 2002; Heller 2007; Kanno 2008; Kramsch 2010; Miller 2003; Nelson 2009; Norton 2000; Potowski 2007; Stein 2008; Toohey 2000); and the establishment in 2002 of the award-winning *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, edited by Ricento and Wiley, has published an exciting array of research on language, identity and education.

## Main issues

### *Theories of language*

One of the main issues in language education research on identity concerns post-Saussurean theories of language, which achieved much prominence in the late twentieth century, and are associated, amongst others, with the work of Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1991), Hall (1997) and Weedon (1997). These theories build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language, associated predominantly with the work of Saussure (1966). For structuralists, the linguistic system guarantees the meaning of signs (the word and its meaning) and each linguistic community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language. Post-structuralists have critiqued these theories of language on the grounds that structuralism cannot account for struggles over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs in a given language. The signs /success/, /education/, /time/, for example, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. While structuralists conceive of signs as having idealized meanings, and linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, post-structuralists take the position that the signifying practices of a society are sites of struggle, and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power. Thus language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication, but is understood with reference to its social meaning in a frequently inequitable world.

In post-structuralist theories of language, there is much interest in the way power is implicated in relationships between individuals, communities, and nations (Janks 2010). Identity researchers often draw on Foucault (1980) and Bourdieu (1991) to better understand how power operates within society, constraining or enabling human action. Foucault (1980) argues, for example, that power is often invisible in that it frequently naturalizes events and practices in ways that come to be seen as 'normal' to members of a community. Bourdieu (1991), who is particularly interested in language and symbolic power, notes further that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. Every time we speak, we are negotiating a sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity.

The research of feminist post-structuralists such as Weedon (1997) has been particularly influential in helping applied linguists theorize identity, or what feminist post-structuralists call subjectivity. Three defining characteristics of subjectivity that are of particular interest to language educators are the multiple, non-unitary nature of the subject; subjectivity as a site of struggle; and subjectivity as changing over time. In post-structuralist theory, subjectivity and language are theorized as mutually constitutive. As Weedon (1997) notes, it is through

language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across a range of sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak. From a language educator's perspective, the conceptualization of subjectivity as multiple and changing is consistent with the view that pedagogical practices can be transformative. While some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to speak, read, or write, other identity positions may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency.

### *Identity categories and social change*

While much research on identity explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners' identities, there is a growing body of research that seeks to investigate the ways in which particular relations of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation may impact the language learning process. Innovative research that addresses these issues does not regard such identity categories as 'variables', but rather as sets of relationships that are socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power. Ibrahim's (1999) research with a group of French-speaking continental African students in a Franco-Ontarian high school in Canada explores the impact on language learning of 'becoming black'. He argues that the students' linguistic styles, and in particular their use of Black Stylized English, was a direct outcome of being imagined and constructed as Black by hegemonic discourses and groups. His findings support the view held by Kubota (2004) that a colour-blind conception of multiculturalism does not do justice to the challenges faced by language learners of diverse races and ethnicities.

Similarly, the work of scholars such as Cameron (2006), Pavlenko (2004), and Sunderland (2004) is particularly insightful with regard to intersections of gender and language (see Baxter, this volume). Their conception of gender, which extends beyond female-male divides, is understood to be a system of social relationships and discursive practices that may lead to systemic inequality among particular groups of learners, including women, older people, disabled people, and minorities. Pavlenko, for example, argues for the need to understand the intersections between gender and other forms of oppression, noting that both girls and boys who are silenced in the language classroom are more likely those who are economically marginalized. A number of these issues are taken up in Norton and Pavlenko (2004), who document research from diverse regions of the world that addresses the relationship between gender and language learning with respect to the dominance of the English language internationally.

In a similar spirit, King (2008), Moffatt and Norton (2008), and Nelson (2009) explore the extent to which sexual orientation might be an important identity category in the language classroom. Of central interest is the way in which a teacher can create a supportive environment for learners who might be gay, lesbian, or transgendered. Nelson contrasts a pedagogy of inquiry, which asks how linguistic and cultural practices naturalize certain sexual identities, most notably heterosexuality, with a pedagogy of inclusion, which aims to introduce images as well as experiences of gays and lesbians into curriculum materials. Nelson's approach can fruitfully be applied to other issues of marginalization, helping learners to question normative practices in the target culture into which they have entered.

Interest in identity categories and language learning is gaining momentum. Special issues of the *TESOL Quarterly* on 'Gender and Language Education' (Davis and Skilton-Sylvester 2004) and 'Race and TESOL' (Kubota and Lin 2006) include insightful debates on gender,

race, and language learning, while recent monographs by May (2008), Heller (2007), and Rampton (2006) ensure that issues of language, ethnicity, and class remain on the radar in the field. However, while taking race, class, gender, and other structural issues into account in their analysis, language educators argue that there is a need to leave conceptual room for the actions and investments of human agents (Menard-Warwick 2006).

### *Identity and language teaching*

The relevance of identity research for classroom teaching is also of much interest to language educators in different parts of the world. As Lee's (2008) research in a Canadian post-secondary institution suggests, while many language teachers strive to enhance the range of possibilities available to their students, there is often a disjuncture between the pedagogy as conceptualized by the teacher and the practices adopted in the classroom. Despite the best intentions, classroom practices can recreate subordinate student identities, thereby limiting students' access not only to language learning opportunities, but to other more powerful identities. Lee's findings are consistent with those of Ramanathan (2005), whose research in India found that teachers' language practices can reinforce existing inequities among diverse learners of English. Her research suggests that pedagogical language practices that are ritualized and allow for little meaning-making on the part of students may limit the learner's access to more powerful identities. To promote meaning-making in the learning process, Wallace (2003) has worked with adult language learners in the United Kingdom on critical reading courses in which she uses text-focussed activities to address how meaning and power are encoded in texts. Wallace contrasts her approach with dominant English foreign language methodologies that can be seen as 'domesticating' for learners, teaching them only how to fit in with dominant cultures rather than to question and reshape the conditions of their lives.

Other research projects, which have taken place in diverse regions of the world, are illustrative of the ways in which particular pedagogical practices in language classrooms can offer students opportunities for an expanded range of identities. In Mexico, Clemente and Higgins (2008) drew on their longitudinal study of pre-service English teachers in Oaxaca to raise questions about the dominant role that English plays in the globalized political economy, and to illustrate the ways in which non-native English teachers sought to appropriate and 'perform' English without sacrificing local identities. In South Africa, Stein (2008) explored the way in which English language classrooms in under-resourced township schools became transformative sites in which textual, cultural, and linguistic forms were re-appropriated and 're-sourced', with a view to validating those practices that had been marginalized and undervalued by the apartheid system. In a similar spirit, scholars have investigated the extent to which multimodal pedagogies that include drawing, photography, and drama can be incorporated more systematically into the English curriculum in Uganda, enhancing identity options for language learners (Kendrick *et al*. 2006).

In many transformative classrooms that have been discussed in language education literature, language teachers' conceptions of 'language' and thus 'language teaching' are broad in scope (Norton and Toohey 2004). The teachers conceive of language not only as a linguistic system, but as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated. There is recognition that if learners are not invested in the language practices of the classroom, learning outcomes are limited, and educational inequities perpetuated. Further, such teachers take great care to offer learners multiple identity positions from which to engage in the language practices of the classroom, the school, and the community.

## New debates and future directions

### *Identity and investment*

One of the new debates in language education research on identity concerns the construct of 'investment', developed in my work to complement constructs of motivation in the field of SLA (Norton 2000; Norton Peirce 1995). In my research with immigrant women in Canada, I observed that existing theories of motivation in the field of SLA were not consistent with my findings, and that theories of motivation did not pay sufficient attention to unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers. Most theories at the time assumed motivation was a character trait of the individual language learner and that learners who failed to learn the target language were not sufficiently committed to the learning process (see, for example, Schumann 1986). My research found that high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning, and that unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers was a common theme in the data.

The construct of investment, inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1991), signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practise it. If learners 'invest' in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Unlike notions of instrumental motivation, which often conceive of the language learner as having a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical 'personality', the construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction. Thus while motivation can be seen as a primarily psychological construct (Dornyei 2001), investment must be seen within a sociological framework, and seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, and their changing identity.

The construct of investment thus provides for a different set of questions associated with a learner's commitment to learning the target language. Instead of asking, for example, 'To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?' the researcher asks, 'What is the learner's investment in the target language practices of this classroom or community?' A learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community, which may, for example, be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. Thus despite being highly motivated, a learner could be excluded from the language practices of a classroom, and in time characterized as a 'poor' or unmotivated language learner.

The construct of investment has sparked considerable interest in the field of language education and applied linguistics (see, for example, Cummins 2006; Haneda 2005; McKay and Wong 1996; Pittaway 2004; Potowski 2007; Skilton-Sylvester 2002), including a special issue on the topic in the *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* (Arkoudis and Davison 2008). Indeed, Cummins (2006), who has drawn on the construct of investment to develop the notion of 'identity texts', has argued that investment has emerged as a 'significant explanatory construct' (2006: 59) in the second language learning literature. As the following projects illustrate, the contexts in which the construct is used varies considerably: McKay and Wong (1996) have drawn on the construct to explain the English language development of four Mandarin-speaking students in grade 7 and 8 in a California school, noting that the needs, desires, and negotiations of students are integral to their investment in the target language. Skilton-Sylvester (2002), drawing on her research with four Cambodian women in adult ESL classes in the

USA, has argued that traditional views of adult motivation and participation do not adequately address the complex lives of adult learners, and that an understanding of a woman's domestic and professional identities is necessary to explain their investment in particular adult ESL programmes. Haneda (2005) has drawn on the construct of investment to understand the engagement of two university students in an advanced Japanese literacy course, concluding that their multimembership in differing communities may have shaped the way they invested in writing in Japanese. And Potowski (2007) uses the construct of investment to explain students' use of Spanish in a dual Spanish/English immersion programme in the USA, noting that even if a language programme is well run, a learner's investment in the target language must be consistent with the goals of the programme if language learning is to meet expectations.

### *Identity and imagined communities*

An extension of debates on identity and investment are the imagined communities (Anderson 1991) that language learners aspire to when they learn a new language. In Norton (2001), I drew on my research with two adult immigrant language learners to argue that while the learners were initially actively engaged in classroom practices, the realm of their desired community extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. This imagined community was not accessible to their respective teachers, who, unwittingly, alienated the two language learners, who then withdrew from the language classroom. I have drawn on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) to argue that in many second language classrooms, all of the members of the classroom community, apart from the teacher, are newcomers to the language practices of that community. The question that arises then is: What community practices do these learners seek to learn? What, indeed, constitutes 'the community' for them?

In many language classrooms, the community may be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination – a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. Such imagined communities can be highly varied, from the imagined community of the more public professional to that of the more local homemaker. Learners have different investments in particular members of the target language community, and the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner. Of particular interest to the language educator is the extent to which such investments are productive for learner engagement in both the classroom and the wider target language community. In essence, an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context.

Such issues have been taken up more extensively in publications such as Pavlenko and Norton (2007) and in a co-edited special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* on 'Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities' (Kanno and Norton 2003) in which a number of scholars have explored the imagined communities of learners in diverse regions of the world – some of whom have subsequently followed up this initial research in more recent publications. In the Japanese context, for example, Kanno (2008) examines the relationship between school education and inequality of access to bilingualism in five different Japanese schools promoting bilingual education. Kanno argues that in the schools she researched, different visions of children's imagined communities called for different forms of bilingual education, exacerbating existing inequities between students with unequal access to resources.

In Canada, Dagenais and her colleagues (2008) have investigated the linguistic landscape in the vicinity of two elementary schools in Vancouver and Montreal, illustrating the ways in which the children imagined the language of their neighbourhoods, and constructed their identities in relation to them. Dagenais *et al*. describe the innovative ways in which researchers and students drew on multimodal resources such as digital photography to document the linguistic landscape of these neighbourhoods, and the way children in both cities were encouraged to exchange letters, posters, photographs, and videos. Dagenais *et al*. argue that documenting the imagined communities of neighbourhoods, as depicted and understood by children, can provide much information on the children's understanding of their community, an important consideration for language educators.

### *Identity and resistance*

Debates on language, identity, and resistance have also become a compelling and fruitful area of research in applied linguistics. While larger structural constraints and classroom practices might position learners in undesirable ways, researchers have found that learners, with human agency, can resist these positions in innovative and unexpected ways. In exploring what he calls the subversive identities of language learners, Canagarajah (2004a), for example, addresses the intriguing question of how language learners can maintain membership of their vernacular communities and cultures while still learning a second language or dialect. He draws on his research with two very different groups, one in the USA and the other in Sri Lanka, to argue that language learners are sometimes ambivalent about the learning of a second language or dialect, and that they may resort to clandestine literacy practices to create 'pedagogical safe houses' in the language classroom. In both contexts, the clandestine literacy activities of the students are seen to be forms of resistance to unfavourable identities imposed on the learners. At the same time, however, these safe houses serve as sites of identity construction, allowing students to negotiate the often contradictory tensions they encounter as members of diverse communities.

Another example of identity and resistance is found in the work of McKinney and van Pletzen (2004). Working with relatively privileged students at a historically white and Afrikaans university in South Africa, McKinney and van Pletzen introduced critical reading into their first year English studies course using two curriculum units on South African literature. In exploring representations of the apartheid past, McKinney and van Pletzen encountered significant resistance from students to the ways in which they felt uncomfortably positioned by the curriculum materials on offer. McKinney and van Pletzen attempted to create discursive spaces in which both they and the students could explore the many private and political processes through which identities are constructed. In doing so, they re-conceptualized students' resistance more productively as a meaning-making activity which offers powerful teaching moments.

The research of Talmy (2008) provides a final example of new debates on identity and resistance. Talmy investigated the multiple ways in which English language learners in a Hawai'i high school resisted being positioned as 'ESL students' in their dedicated ESL classes. While the school-sanctioned ESL student was expected to bring required materials to class, read assigned fiction, do bookwork, meet assigned dates, follow instructions, and work for the full class session, resistant ESL students engaged in a wide variety of oppositional activities, including leaving materials 'at home', talking with friends, and playing cards. Talmy found that ESL teachers needed to change their pedagogical practices in response to the resistance of their students, necessitating a significant shift in teacher identity.

### *Future directions*

With regard to future directions on identity and applied linguistics, one area that is receiving increasing attention is that of the language teacher and the language teacher educator (see Clarke 2008; Hawkins and Norton 2009; Pennycook 2004; Varghese *et al*. 2005). In a compelling narrative, Pennycook (2004) reflects on his experience of observing a teacher in a TESOL practicum in Sydney, Australia. His experience reminds us that a great deal of language teaching does not take place in well-funded institutes of education, but in community programmes, places of worship, and immigrant centres, where funds are limited and time at a premium. Of central interest in his narrative is a consideration of the way in which teacher educators can intervene in the process of practicum observation to bring about educational and social change. To this end, Pennycook argues that 'critical moments' in the practicum can be used to raise larger questions of power and authority in the wider society, and provide an opportunity for critical discussion and reflection.

A second area that has much potential for future research on applied linguistics and identity concerns growing interest in globalization and language learning (see, for example, Block and Cameron 2002; Blommaert 2008; Garciá *et al*. 2006; Lin and Martin 2005; Morgan and Ramanathan 2005; Pennycook 2007; Prinsloo and Baynham 2008; Rassool 2007). Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) argue persuasively that the field of language education needs to consider ways in which English language teaching can be decolonized, proposing that there is a need to decenter the authority that Western interests have in the language teaching industry. In particular, applied linguists need to find ways to restore agency to professionals in periphery communities (Kumaravadivelu 2003) and to give due recognition to local vernacular modes of learning and teaching (Canagarajah 2004b; Tembe and Norton 2008). In this regard, special issues of a number of journals are significant, including: the *TESOL Quarterly* on 'Language in Development' (Markee 2002) and 'Language Policies and TESOL' (Ramanathan and Morgan 2007); and two recent issues of the AILA *Review of the International Association of Applied Linguistics* on 'Africa and Applied Linguistics' (Makoni and Meinhof 2003) and 'World Applied Linguistics' (Gass and Makoni 2004).

## The influence of new technology

Much emerging research on identity addresses the impact of literacy practices on relationships beyond the classroom, much of which is mediated through technology (Andema 2009; Kramsch and Thorne 2002; Lam 2000; Snyder and Prinsloo 2007; Warschauer 2003; Warriner 2007; White 2007). Lam (2000) for example, who studied the Internet correspondence of a Chinese immigrant teenager in the USA who entered into transnational communication with a group of peers, demonstrates how this experience in what she calls 'textual identity' related to the student's developing identity in the use of English. In another context, White (2007) has investigated innovation in distance language teaching in the Australian context, arguing that attention to issues of identity can enhance our understanding of educational innovation. The research of Kramsch and Thorne (2002) indicates, however, that not all transnational Internet communication leads to positive identity outcomes. In their study of the synchronous and asynchronous communication between American learners of French in the USA and French learners of English in France, they found that students had little understanding of the larger cultural framework within which each party was operating, leading to problematic digital exchanges.

Significantly, as scholars such as Andema (2009), Snyder and Prinsloo (2007) and Warschauer (2003) note, much of the digital research in applied linguistics has focused on research in

wealthier regions of the world, and there is a great need for research in poorly resourced communities to impact global debates on digital literacy. With reference to the Ugandan context, for example, Mutonyi and Norton (2007) note that as digital technology becomes a globalization tool, Ugandan curriculum developers need to interrogate the ways in which local digital practices may diverge from global expectations. To address this concern, Prinsloo (2005) notes that digital innovations need to be studied as 'placed resources', suggesting that any given technology, when transplanted, takes on new meanings. The extent to which the resource offers opportunities for users, and the ways in which it is used, has important implications for shifts in the identities of both students and teachers.

## Summary

This chapter traced the genesis of research on identity and language education from the 1970s to the present day, focusing on some of the major theoretical influences on identity research. A central argument made is that changes in identity research index a shift from a predominantly psycholinguistic to sociolinguistic model of SLA. The main issues identified included the ways in which language is theorized; what identity categories are considered particularly salient in language learning; and the impact of identity research on classroom practice. New debates address the relationship between identity, investment, and imagined communities, with increasing interest in identity and resistance. Research on identity suggests that the extent to which a learner speaks or is silent, and writes, reads, or resists has much to do with the extent to which the learner is valued in any given institution or community. In this regard, social processes marked by inequities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may serve to position learners in ways that silence and exclude. At the same time, however, learners may resist marginalization through both covert and overt acts of resistance. Of central interest to researchers of identity is that the very articulation of power, identity, and resistance is expressed in and through language. Language is thus more than a system of signs; it is social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated. Exciting areas of future research include the changing identities of language teachers, and the impact of globalization and technological change on identities of language learners and teachers.

## Related topics

culture; ethnicity; gender; language learning and language education; migration; SLA

## Further reading

Block, D. (2007) *Second Language Identities*, London and New York: Continuum. (In this monograph, David Block insightfully traces research interest in second language identities from the 1960s to the present. He draws on a wide range of social theory, and brings a fresh analysis to seminal studies of adult migrants, foreign language learners, and study-abroad students.)

Norton, B. (2000) *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity, and Educational Change*, Harlow: Pearson Longman. (Drawing on a longitudinal study of immigrant women in Canada, Bonny Norton draws on post-structuralist theory to argue for a conception of learner identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change. She also develops the construct of 'investment' to better understand the relationship of language learners to the target language.)

Norton, B. and Toohey, K. (eds) (2004) *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Identity is a central theme in this collection of articles by leading researchers in language education. Diverse authors address a wide range of contemporary topics

on language learning and teaching, including critical multiculturalism, gender, multimodal pedagogies, popular culture, and action research.)

Pavlenko, A. and Blackledge, A. (eds) (2003) *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. (The authors in this collection provide insight into the ways in which identities are negotiated in diverse multilingual settings. They analyse the discourses of education, autobiography, politics, and youth culture, demonstrating the ways in which languages may be sites of resistance, empowerment, or discrimination.)

Toohey, K. (2000) *Learning English at School: Identity, Social Relations and Classroom Practice*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. (Drawing on a longitudinal ethnography of young English language learners, Kelleen Toohey investigates the ways in which classroom practices are implicated in the range of identity options available to language learners. She draws on sociocultural and poststructural theory to better understand the classroom community as a site of identity negotiation.)

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