

Social Psychological Variables and Language Variation

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For at least 50 years, sociolinguists and social psychologists have been interested in understanding the relation between variations in language style and social psychological constructs, including perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality, attitudes towards the language and its speakers, and identity processes. In this presentation I will briefly review some of the issues that I've come across with regards to the quantitative assessment of these social psychological variables, focusing primarily on ethnic identity. My perspective is informed by social psychological research on language and intergroup relations, but also from research in cultural psychology that looks at the process of identity change as a result of intercultural contact and acculturation. Perhaps the most significant theme that I wish to emphasize is the importance of assessing identity as a multi-faceted, subjective phenomenon that varies depending upon the context.

First, the measurement of identity necessitates the subjective assessment of one's sense of belonging to one or more ethnolinguistic groups. The notion that identity is "subjective" emphasizes that our actual feelings of identity may or may not correspond with the identities that others ascribe to us, and thus "objective" indicators, such as language background or other census-type descriptors, might not adequately capture these personal sentiments (Leets, Giles, & Clément, 1998). But even when subjective assessments are made (directly or implicitly), there are many ways in which identity can be construed. For instance, in their review of research on collective identity, Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) came up with a catalogue of related, but distinct concepts. These included self-categorization, evaluation of that group, importance of that group to the person, their sense of attachment, behavioral involvement and enactment, among a number of other dimensions. Importantly, these various aspects of identity are differentially related to other variables of interest.

Second, social identities are relational, such that at least two reference groups are important to consider: the heritage ethnic group and any other relevant ethnolinguistic group(s). In the case of minority groups, the other reference group might be the dominant group (e.g., Chinese-Canadians and Anglo-Canadians), but more groups might be relevant depending on the context (e.g., both Anglophone and Francophone groups if a Chinese-Canadian lives in Québec). An implication of this assumption is that people could identify to different degrees with different groups, such that at least four profiles are possible, including identification with one's original group and not the other (separation) or the converse (assimilation), identification with both groups (integration) or with neither group (marginalization; see Berry, 1990). The work of Bourhis and his colleagues (1997, 2011) emphasizes that such profiles are "interactive" in the sense that both the minority group and the "mainstream" society have ideals about which profiles are

most appropriate, and these opinions may or may not correspond across the interacting groups.

Third, identity is situationally variable, depending on where we are, with whom we are speaking, and what we are doing (among other aspects). To assess situated ethnic identity in a paper-and-pencil measure, Richard Clément and I (1992) developed hypothetical scenarios reflecting interactions across situational domains that varied in intimacy, including family, friends, university, community, and asked participants to tell us about their feelings of heritage and Canadian identity across these domains. A growing body of research across interethnic contexts shows that heritage identity is much stronger than Canadian identity in the family domain, but the converse tends to be true in less intimate settings. (e.g., Clément & Noels, 1992; Clément, Singh, & Gaudet, 2006; Noels, Clément, & Gauthier, 2004; Noels, Leavitt, & Clément, 2010; Zhang & Noels, 2012). These findings emphasize that global measures of identity can hide the fact that people might switch identities depending upon the situation. They also suggest a process by which identity changes as a result of interethnic contact, progressing from less to more intimate domains.

These issues will be discussed with reference to the presentations made during the LSA workshop and to research by the author and by other researchers in social and cultural psychology. Additional topics may include the assessment of bicultural identities.

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