

Multicultural Identities in the Making: You Are What You Speak

by Dr. John Raible

Identity: is it something we are, something we have, or is identity what we do? I used to think of identity as something we are, a permanent entity that we possess, akin to our skin color or gender. Moreover, I thought of identity as an attribute passed from parent to child. Identity seemed to be a characteristic that was inherited like the color of our eyes or how tall we might grow. Like other traits that were influenced as much by nature as by nurture, I thought identity was essentially given at birth, and later tweaked and refined through a socialization process.

My understanding of identity shifted significantly while working on my doctoral degree. As a graduate student in Language, Literacy, and Culture, I took many classes with professors who were interested in language and how it connects to culture. As trained linguists, some of my professors encouraged us to look at life through the lens of sociolinguistics. By coming to understand language as a cultural tool used by all humans to accomplish goals and get things done, I began to appreciate identity itself as the product of language, or more accurately, as produced through language.

One important goal shared by all humans is to relate to and interact with other people. I began to consider how the use of language connected us to each other as social beings. I learned how the expression of individuality is actually a reflection of patterns of interaction over time. These patterns arise because they work to bind group members together, strengthening social ties that advance the welfare of the group. Through language, each of us asserts our identity (that is, our personality, our preferences, our individuality), which is in turn reacted to, affirmed, and at times even challenged by those with whom we interact. As people use language strategically to get their needs and desires met, their linguistic bids are rarely met without opposition. The patterns that result from these repeated and ongoing interactions accumulate to reflect the cultures we are born into or adopt as much as our individuality.

Coming to see identity as the result of ongoing negotiations between individuals was nothing short of exhilarating. For me, someone who is interested in understanding how race works and in advancing anti-racism, it meant that we actually have some say in how other people see us, and are not simply stuck with an identity imposed from the outside.

One useful illustration of the negotiated nature of language—and by extension identity—is thinking about regional accents. How is it that a child learns to speak in ways that tell listeners that she comes from Boston rather than Dallas, not to mention Dublin? How do speakers of the same language (in this case English) come to sound like each other, yet are at the same time distinguishable from people in another part of the English-speaking world? The answer is fairly simple: by associating repeatedly with adults and peers who speak in similar patterns, particular ways of speaking are reinforced to the point that they become habitual. Regional accents (and other ways of using language) reflect the speech communities we belong to, which in turn reflect what we know as the cultures of those speech community participants.

Yet these habits of speech are not necessarily permanent. When, for instance, I moved from Wisconsin to Massachusetts as a ten-year-old, my ears and mouth had to get used to new patterns of speech. In order to fit in and be accepted by my new classmates and teachers (i.e., a new speech community), I altered the way I sounded and took on some (though by no means all) of the speech habits of the people with whom I wanted to fit in. My Midwestern accent and identity was malleable to the point that I trained myself to sound less like a Wisconsin Cheesehead and more like a Bostonian. In fact, there are still times when I can willfully make myself sound more Bostonian or even British (since my adoptive mother hails from Liverpool, and I still have cousins and extended family who live in England).

Accents and other ways of using language—like other markers of identity—are fluid rather than fixed.

Ways of speaking can change depending on circumstances, for example, who I'm talking to at the moment, or the speech community I'm hoping will understand me and accept me. Becoming aware of various social contexts and my ability to modify my responses to reflect different circumstances has been empowering. I think my ability to turn on or off various accents, and to adjust my speech to various audiences, is related to Joyce Maguire Pavao's notion that all adoptees become hyper-sensitive social chameleons who are highly adaptable to changing social environments as a survival strategy.

If I (and other adoptees) can figure out strategically when and how to adapt, then others (like adoptive parents) can too. Depending on our priorities, needs, and desires, each of us has some ability to influence the way we sound and how we interact with people from different backgrounds and in different social environments. It is helpful to think of identity more as a verb rather than as a noun. In other words, identity is what we do, more than what we are. If we want to assert a particular identity, then we can consciously change how we sound and make choices about which speech communities we interact with on a regular basis. This is one of the reasons I urge white adoptive parents to give much thought to where they live and raise their adopted children of color.

When I arrived in Compton, California with my repertoire of Midwestern, Bostonian, and British accents, I needed to hang out and interact with African Americans for extended periods of time in order to learn to "sound black." If you no longer want to sound WASPy, upper middle class, and elitist, then hang out with folks who are not. It's as simple as that. We do have choices, and we can assert some control over our identities and how people respond to the identity bids that are reflected in the ways we speak.

Of course, our bids to assert particular identities and ways of speaking have to sound authentic if they are going to be taken seriously. We've all witnessed adults who try to sound cool or hip in front of teenagers, but end up making fools of themselves by using youth slang words inappropriately or in ways that just don't ring true. As a highly educated biracial African American raised and socialized in white middle class speech communities, I often come across white individuals who call me "man" too many times, or who lapse into their version of working class urban speech or even Ebonics, thinking that that's how they should interact with me. Their bids to connect with me sound odd and inauthentic to my ears. The way I respond sets into motion our negotiation of how we're going to interact and which speech community's rules and customs will apply. My verbal and body language responses can signal acceptance or rejection of their speech bids to connect culturally. In my experience, they usually alter their responses to my response, and we end up interacting in less explicitly "black" ways.

Yet there are times when it is socially useful to apply the customs and rules from different African American speech communities during my interactions with various individuals (of different races). Without overdoing it, I can drop subtle linguistic clues into conversation that signal my identification with African Americans, or with Chicanos in Los Angeles or Navajo Indians on the reservation, for that matter. I can do this credibly because I have lived in these communities at different points in my life.

For me, the ongoing process of becoming a multicultural person has been helped immeasurably by my willingness to relocate to different parts of our country to live for extended periods of time. As a result of my various moves, I have been able to experience daily life—and interact with new speech communities—in real, as opposed to forced or contrived ways.

By placing myself in new social contexts, I have forced myself to learn new rules and customs. Instead of imposing my personal and possibly stereotyped version of how I think people should sound on my new colleagues and friends in these various communities, I have learned to become flexible and to negotiate as an equal (and for a time, as a novice) in order to be taken seriously. It has helped to enter each new community with some important background knowledge along with a stance of respect and openness, and with an attitude of humility and genuine intellectual (rather than touristic or colonizing) curiosity.

We all know what it feels like to be talked down to in a patronizing way. Part of cultivating humility, for me, is continually practicing keen observation and intent listening skills. Rather than assuming I already know what's going on, or what the rules and customs are going to be, or the "right" way to conduct myself, I strive to stay open and in the moment as an authentic, genuinely curious person. It also helps to have a strong belief in myself and my right to participate in the speech community I have entered. My self-confidence always increases when I believe that I have something of value to share with the community, instead of merely showing up to take what I can, which feels more exploitative. Entering a new speech community speeds up the process of learning another culture, from the inside out. If done sensitively and authentically, it can provoke transformative insights into your own values and personality, as well as lead to new friendships and alliances with individuals you might never have imagined possible.

To sum up, I believe that it is through language that the values, beliefs, worldviews, and priorities of a culture are created, taught, learned, and transmitted. Languages and cultures are never static, and as a result, neither are identities. I have found it helpful to think of identity as the cumulative pattern of interactions with others within the multiple speech communities we belong to over time. As a reflection of our participation in various speech communities, we have more control over our identities—and identifications—than previously we may have believed. Each of us has innumerable ongoing opportunities to enter new speech communities, and by so doing, to influence our identities to bring them more in line with the multicultural world of harmonious interconnections that we say we believe in. After all is said and done, we are what we speak. Therefore, it behooves us to choose our words—and our speech communities—carefully and intentionally.

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