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Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

Rita Salvi & Janet Bowker (eds)

# Space, Time and the Construction of Identity

Discursive Indexicality in Cultural,  
Institutional and Professional Fields

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## Preface

This volume is one of the scientific products resulting from a PRIN project 2008, which gathered the Universities of Modena-Reggio Emilia, Bergamo, Florence, Naples ‘L’Orientale’ and Rome “Sapienza”. The research groups were privileged to have prof. Marina Bondi as national coordinator. The general title of the project was “Discourse identities and sense of space: from key-words to phraseology”. Fundamentally, the project aimed at a methodological rethinking about the notion of ‘keywords’ in relation to phraseology, the influence of the cognitive factors of time and space in the construction of identity, and the integration of discourse analysis with corpus linguistics. The studies collected in this volume, therefore, tend to further illuminate the nature of communication – corporate, institutional, professional and academic – in which the construal, maintenance and repairing of identity develop in the course of time and in different locations or mental spaces.

At the broadest level, it was hypothesized that the various genres, subgenres and variations in contextual use (corporate and institutional websites, internal corporate communications, academic lectures and cultural encounters) would share a great deal in their modes of realization of their major communicative purposes, namely those of creating persuasive and coherent textualizations to project and promote a series of positions and behaviours which pertain to the field of different specialized languages. However, at a micro-level, investigations into the differing contexts of use reveal a range of specific linguistic features as well as pragmatic patterns and strategies employed in both the externally-directed expression and referencing of time and spatial relationships in language, as well as the obverse, the functioning of linguistic indexicality in the internalized shaping of perceptions and cognition ranged along these fundamental experiential dimensions.

The analytical routes used by the authors of this volume to uncover these correlations are varied, using differing theoretical models and empirical approaches: quantitative and qualitative methods assume changing centrality in the chapters, a number of descriptive linguistic frameworks are also pertinent, but a common thread lies in the central role of co-constituent creative negotiation and participant interaction in the construal of identity. In this process the interlocutors' identity is established and reinforced in relation to a sense of place, of belonging to particular social and professional groups, these being characterized by differentiating sets of values, beliefs, norms and practices. The descriptions, then, focus on how personal, professional and corporate identities are shaped through changing social, cultural and ideological perspectives in different temporal and spatial positioning.

In sum, despite the rather daunting extent and abstraction of the categories of description central to this volume – time, space, identity and their relationship to discourse and language – hopefully the specialized, empirical studies contained here shed valuable insights into this vast and challenging area. The findings reported may also be of interest beyond any narrowly defined academic sphere, incorporating relevance for educational and professional practitioners alike.

MARINA BONDI

## Introduction

“Another book on identity needs some justification” claims Ken Hyland in the preface of his recent book on disciplinary identities in academic writing (2012: ix). And just restricting the focus to discursive identity or even to the interplay between cultural, institutional and professional identities certainly does not in itself provide a strong rationale. The motivation for this collection of papers lies rather in the need to explore the role played by indexicality – and by the representation of space in particular – in the discursive construction of identity. This volume and the research project from which it develops – a national project on *Discourse Identities and Sense of Space: from Keywords to Phraseology* – investigate how cultural, institutional and professional identities are constructed linguistically through a corpus-informed investigation of discourse. Its distinctive perspective is thus methodological as well as thematic. Combining the tools of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, the book focuses on indexicality and on the representation of space-time in discourse as important tools of identity construction.

Discourse identity has become an increasingly popular research topic in recent years (De Fina *et al.* eds. 2006; Benwell/Stokoe 2006; Llamas/Watt 2010), across disciplines and analytical approaches, including critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis and ‘membership categorization analysis’ (Antaki/Widdicombe 1998). Goffman (1967) had already developed an account of the self as social construction bridging the theoretical and analytical divide between self and society. In discourse approaches, participants are seen to draw upon multiple identities in a given communicative context and identities are dynamically negotiated as discourse unfolds (De Fina *et al.* 2006). This can be indexed linguistically through labels, code choices, lexical choices, stances, styles or different structures, which

can in turn be related to macro social categories as ethnic group, social class, nationality or gender (e.g. Gumperz 1982).

Indexicality involves the features of language that refer directly to the context in which an utterance takes place: expressions of personal, temporal and locational deixis (expressions such as *we*, *today*, *this report*, *here*, and *you*) are typically associated with different meanings (or referents) on different occasions. The notions of person, space and time in general are inextricably linked together and together contribute to establishing a point of view in discourse. By using locatives, personal pronouns and time expressions language users do not only point to their roles as discourse producers and recipients but also to their location in time and space and to their relationship to others (present or absent) (De Fina *et al.* 2006).

Recent socio-anthropological approaches extend to non-literary narratives the bakhtinian notion of chronotope – “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1981: 84) – and expand its scope. Agha (2007: 320) talks of “‘cultural chronotopes’, namely depictions of place-time-and-personhood to which social interactants orient when they engage each other through discursive signs of any kind”: talking of West and East Germany, for example, would imply referring to a specific time and place, and would normally ‘position’ the speaker/writer. Starting from similar assumptions, Schiffrin (2009: 243), points at a range of “textual features by which a speaker can construct both personal and place identity”.

First and second person pronouns play an important role in constructing social identities because they refer to the interpersonal relations of the discourse participants, but specialized lexis is also used in institutional discourse to display expertise and thus distinguish professional identity in the eyes of lay-person (Drew/Heritage 1992). Certain lexical items can act as ‘cultural keywords’ in various types of discourse, thus providing interesting insights into the social and personal identities of those who use them, as well as the values and ideals of their discourse community (Williams 1976; Stubbs 2001; Baker 2006). Lexical choice can be seen to reflect the value-system of the speaker and the discourse community and thus act as identity markers.