Chapter 9

Language and identity

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9.1 Introduction

One of the most fundamental ways we have of establishing our identity, and of shaping other people’s views of who we are, is through our use of language. This chapter continues the theme established in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 about how people use language to construct a social identity (or identities) for themselves, and also about how social groups and communities use language as a means of identifying their members, and of establishing their boundaries.

Because language is so important in the construction of individual and social identities, it can also be a powerful means of exercising social control. Identifying yourself as belonging to a particular group or community often means adopting the linguistic conventions of that group, and this is not just in relation to the words you use, but also in relation to the way that you say them. The way those conventions are defined and maintained is usually controlled by the group rather than the individual. In this chapter we will also look briefly at how language relates to national and political identities.

9.2 What do we mean by linguistic identity?

How you talk, along with other kinds of social codes such as how you dress or how you behave, is an important way of displaying who you are; in other words, of indicating your social identity. This question of identity, who we are, how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, is not defined simply by factors such as where we were born and brought up, who our parents are or were, and which socio-economic group we happen to belong to. Identity, whether it is on an individual, social or institutional level, is something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives through our interaction with others. Identity is also multifaceted; people switch into different roles at different times in different situations, and each of those contexts may require a shift into different, sometimes conflicting, identities for the people involved. One of the ways in which we accomplish and display this shift is through the language we use.

How can language indicate this kind of information? Various factors come into play here. First of all, on the individual level, where you grew up, where you went to school, how wealthy (or not) your family were, will to some extent be displayed through the variety of the language that you speak. Often the most immediately obvious difference in the way that people speak is in their accent (the phonological level of language), but there are also grammatical variations between speakers (see also Chapters 8 and 10) and, in Britain at least, someone’s accent and dialect always carries a great deal of information about them. They can indicate not only their regional origin but also their social class and, to some extent, the kind of education they had.

It is often the case that children change the way they talk if they move from one region of Britain to another, sometimes even from one school to another. As a personal example, I was born and brought up in Cumbria, in the north-west of England, in a middle-class family. I attended a small private school until the age of eleven, when I went to the local secondary school, and then my accent changed. From fairly mainstream RP, I began to sound much more regionally as a Cumbrian. When I was fourteen years old, my parents moved to the Midlands; my accent changed again and I began to sound less Cumbrian and more mainstream RP again. After leaving school I went to a northern university, and shifted back into using some of the sounds I had left behind in Cumbria.

The way that I spoke was also commented on by people in the places where I lived. In the Midlands, new friends referred to me as a ‘primitive northerner’; when back visiting old friends in the north, they said I talked like a southerner. Later, while at university, I visited my sister in the south of England where her friends commented on how different I sounded from her. In order to fit into a new community, one of the most powerful resources I had at my disposal to show that I was just like the new group of young people I was spending my time with was the way I spoke. Significantly, this was not the same way either my parents or my sister spoke. So within the same family, even within the same generation, there can be a very wide diversity in the way different family members sound.

The importance of accent as a label of identity is evident in so far as this is the aspect of their language that speakers most frequently change, either to disguise their membership of, or distance themselves from, a particular social or regional group, or to move closer to another group they want to belong to. However, linguistic identity is not just a matter of using one dialect or code (the term sociolinguists use to refer to language varieties as systems of communication) rather than another, or one accent rather than another. It is also a matter of how we use language with others; in other words, how we communicate and interact with others through talk.
9.3 Language and the construction of personal identities

In this section we look first at how personal identities are socially constructed through the use of names, naming practices and rituals. We also look at systems of address, i.e. the way you refer to someone when you are talking to them directly, and how speakers use language to classify and identify each other through these systems.

9.3.1 Names and naming practices

One of the most obvious linguistic means of establishing people's identity is through the giving and using of names. We are distinguished from other members of a group by our name, which sets us apart as an individual, as different from others, even though we might share other attributes, such as belonging to the same family, or the same school class. In Britain and the United States, Western cultures distinguish between given (first) name and family (last) name, the given name being traditionally the father's family name. In some cultures, for example in Russia, people are identified further by names which designate them as 'son of X' or 'daughter of Y'. These names are called patronyms. In Iceland, it is the patronymic name that is used as the family name, so this changes from generation to generation.

Names can sometimes carry important meanings for individual identity, as expressed by Zambian writer Felly Nkweto Simonondo:

Friends ask me why I don't just drop my non-African names. It would be a good idea, but not a practical one. In reality, my reason has nothing to do with practicality, it has to do with my own identity. For better, for worse, my names locate me in time and space. It gives me a sense of my own history that I not only share specifically with a generation of people in Africa but also with all Africans in the Diaspora.

I belong to a time. The twentieth century. A time of fragmentation, a time of rebirth. I need to understand and know myself from that position. It is the only position I have, wherever I am. In both my private and my public life. I'm also lucky. Naming myself differently to suit the occasion allows me the space to experience all my subjective realities and identities (we all have many) in a way that does not imply fragmentation, but coherence.

(Nkweto Simonondo 1998: 36)

The naming practices and rituals of social groups are often similarly important ceremonies, and vary from culture to culture. The following passage describes the Hindu practice of choosing a child's name:

Later that same day the priest was called, and he was known to be a good man and a holy one; and one, moreover, who could read the pats, the astrological almanac, and cast a horoscope and tell in a minute the luck of a child; what it should guard against as it grew up and the name it should have in consonance with its horoscope.

[Naipaul 1976: 26]

In the Hindu religion as practised in Trinidad up until about thirty years ago, a child was given two names. One, called the 'ram' name, was determined by reading the 'patsa', which gives the astrological positions of the stars at the time of the birth of the child. The function of this name was to give the child strength, but it was not used to address them, as anyone who knew your 'ram' name could possess or manipulate you if they wished. A second name was also given to address the child by, also based on the 'patsa', and its function was to protect the child and give them as much good fortune as possible according to their predicted horoscope. Both names were conferred at a naming ceremony at the first full moon after birth.

The giving of a name can also be part of the acceptance of an individual into a particular culture or religion, establishing individual identity but also simultaneously a religious identity (for example the bar/mitzvah in the Jewish religion, or the giving of a saint's name at confirmation in the Roman Catholic faith).

The attribution of names is only part of the story, however. Once you have your name, how people use it becomes very important. The way names are used in interaction is central to the process of constructing individual identities within a group. In one of his lectures, the American sociologist Harvey Sacks (1995) describes the relevance of how names are used in interaction sequences for establishing not only who people are but what they can call each other. Introductions can be symmetrical, i.e. so far as speakers can choose to introduce people as being of the same type and status, or belonging to the same group, for example by using both first names as in:

Jim, this is Alice

or as asymmetrical, i.e. being of a different type, as in:

Jim, this is Dr Jones
This choice of names by the person doing the introducing can have an effect on how the rest of the conversation proceeds, and Sacks suggests that, when you put people “into a state of talk” by introducing them, you are not just giving them a name to use but “the choice of a name is already informative to them of more that they can use in conducting their conversation” (1995: Lecture 6).

What you get called is not necessarily a matter of personal choice, though. Names can cause problems, particularly if they don’t fit in with the conventions of a community. Children’s playground practice of ‘calling someone names’ is also a powerful resource for a dominant group to enforce their dominance and marginalise others. Nkwele Simmonds again comments that:

in public, at conferences, for example, I insist that my full name appears on my name tag. In a society that cannot accommodate names that come from ‘other’ cultures, this can be a frustrating exercise. It is no wonder that many Black children will Anglicise their names to avoid playground taunts. . . . and much worse. (Nkwele Simmonds 1998)

**ACTIVITY 9.1**

What kind of identity does your name give you? How do you feel if someone uses it wrongly? Think of all the different ways people can name you (e.g. nickname or pet name, title plus full name) and how these construct different identities for you in different contexts.

9.3.2 Systems of address

It is not only the name you have, but the way that people use it in different contexts which helps to establish your identity within that context. The way that other speakers refer to you can depend on the degree of formality, of intimacy and of relative status of all the participants involved in the interaction. Think of the people you know and how you have to address them; for example, by first name (Mary), by title and last name (Ms A, Mr B, Dr C), by some kind of deferential form (sir, ma’am). These systems of address are culturally determined. For example, it is customary in France to address members of the legal profession as maître, whereas in Britain there is no equivalent professional label to use when directly addressing a lawyer – but there is if you are addressing a judge: your honour or m’lord or m’lady. To disregard the rules can lead to some form of disapproval or sanction, or, at worst, be interpreted as an insult.

The way that address terms are used can have important implications and effects on the participants in a conversational exchange. In her study of American address terms, Susan Ervin-Tripp describes a famous triple insult based on the choice of address terms by a white American policeman in addressing a black American doctor:

> What’s your name, boy?
> 'Dr Poussaint, I’m a physician.'
> 'What’s your first name, boy?'
> 'Alvin.'

(Ervin-Tripp 1980: 22)

She shows how, by using the address term ‘boy’, the policeman is deliberately insulting the doctor by not acknowledging his age, rank or status. Poussaint responds by giving his title and last name, and in doing so he indicates that he is not complying with the white policeman’s use of an address term that places him in a socially inferior position. The policeman’s next question shows that he does not consider the response ‘Dr Poussaint’ from a black adult male as a suitable answer to his question. In asking for his first name and again addressing him inappropriately as ‘boy’, the policeman is repeating his earlier insult and assigning the doctor to the rank of ‘child’ or ‘inferior’. In his choice of address terms, he is signalling his refusal to recognise the doctor’s adult status and professional rank. The effect of this sequence was experienced and recorded by Dr Poussaint as ‘profound humiliation’ (Ervin-Tripp 1980: 18).

The way that the second person pronoun (you) is used in many languages can also be a linguistic indicator of social identity, used to construct social relations of solidarity, intimacy or distance (see Crystal 1987). The so-called T/V distinction (based on the French pronoun system where tu is the familiar form of address, and vous the formal, polite form) in second person pronouns has now been lost in English, where social relations are no longer encoded in the pronoun system. But in many other European languages speakers have a choice between addressing someone with the informal, intimate second person pronoun tu (dú in Spanish and German), or the formal, distancing second person pronoun (Usted/Sie). Age can also determine the use of these pronouns. For example, in French it is acceptable for a child to address adults using the tu form, whereas if one adult addressed another they did not know very well using tu, it would be noticeable, and, as with the absence of a particular title, in some cases may be taken as an insult.
In a language with complex honorific markers, such as Japanese, a speaker must learn the social hierarchy of respect and condescension, and their place within that hierarchy, in order to produce grammatically correct pronoun forms (Mühlhäusler and Harris 1990). For example, the first person pronoun watashi ('I') is used by men to mark formal status, but by women to mark neutral status (Crystal 1987). In Russian, the choice of address pronoun is governed by a range of complex individual and social considerations; group membership is indicated by the use of the familiar ты form between speakers, for example between people who come from the same village, while individual emotional states of closeness, anger, respect and love can also be signalled by switching to твоя rather than твой, the more formal, distancing form.

So the words you choose to address people by are important ways of showing how you situate yourself in relation to others, of creating social distance or intimacy, of making deference, condescension or insult through the conventions of the address system of a language.

9.4 Language and the construction of group identities

We next examine how people can construct their social identity by categorising themselves (or being categorised by others) as belonging to a social group through particular types of representation. We also look at how speakers' choice of linguistic code, or variety, plays an important role in establishing their group identity. We will illustrate these ideas with some of the findings of research on the relationship between language and group identity, looking at such aspects as shared linguistic norms within a group, the role of speech communities (this term refers to social groupings which can range in size from a whole region to a city street, to a teenage gang) and the definition of social categories and group boundaries.

9.4.1 Identity and representation

In places where there is social conflict there will often be linguistic conflict too, about whose words are used, and about which terms are used by which group of people to identify themselves and their opponents. People often have to work to establish their own identity categories, to name their particular social group, and stake their claim in owning their representations of themselves. In a discussion of these kinds of categories, Sacks (1995) analyses the case of teenage groups in the United States during the 1960s who used the term ‘hotrodders’ to describe themselves, and makes the following observation:

If a kid is driving, he’s seen as a teenager driving, and he’s seen via the category ‘teenager,’ compared to the variety of things he could be categorised as. His problem, then, initially, is that he is in fact going to be typed; where for one, the category ‘teenager’ is a category owned by adults.

(Sacks 1995: Lecture 7)

The point Sacks is making here is that social categories, or labels of identity, are frequently imposed on some groups by others, who may be in a more powerful position than they are, or may be using the label to make some kind of social judgement about them. We do not always control the categories people use to define our identity, or the cultural assumptions that accompany them.

In Sacks' example above, the important thing for this group was to be in a position to own their own category, 'hotrodder,' rather than have one imposed upon them by another group. Sacks suggests that one of the ways in which kids work towards establishing independence from adults, and also exert some form of control over who gets to be a member of a particular group, is to develop their own set of categories rather than be defined by terms used by others, whose values they do not share.

9.4.2 Ingroups and outgroups

Your social identity is not something you can always determine on your own; it is also bound up with how others perceive you. In fact, it would be difficult to conceive of identity as a purely individual matter. Your perception of yourself as an individual can only be in relation to others, and your status within a social group. This status can be constructed through language use in various ways.

As with other kinds of social codes which people use to display membership of a social group, like dress codes, certain kinds of linguistic behaviour also signal your identity in relation to a group, as well as your position within it. Being able to show that you can use linguistic terms appropriately according to the norms associated with a particular group helps to establish your membership of it, both to other members of the group, the ingroup, and those outside it, the outgroup. Furthermore, adhering to the linguistic norms of one group may position you very clearly as showing that you do not belong to others.

In his study of the language used by members of street gangs in New York, William Labov (1972c) found that the core members of groups shared the most linguistic similarities. Although all the members of these gangs were
perceived as speaking the non-standard 'Black English Vernacular' (BEV), it was those boys who were at the centre of the group, and who were perceived by the other boys as its core members, whose speech showed the strongest and most consistent use of the vernacular. Labov also found that the more integrated a boy was into the 'vernacular' culture of the gang, the more his use of language would be consistent with the vernacular, non-standard grammar used by those members at the core of the group. Those on the periphery of the gang culture, referred to by the gang's own category label of 'lames', would show a greater degree of distance from the vernacular. So membership of a group, and the position you hold within that group, either as a core member or as a peripheral member, is accomplished in considerable measure through the language that you use.

Often, language use fits in with other indicators of social identity and group membership, such as style of clothes, type of haircut and taste in music. In a study of high-school students in the Detroit suburbs in the 1980s, Penelope Eckert found that there were two social categories: students who participated in all school activities and who would go on to college were referred to and referred to themselves as 'jocks'; students whose lives were based outside school in the local area and who were destined for the blue-collar workforce were referred to, and referred to themselves, as 'burnouts'. These two categories were the defining identities of all the adolescents, boys and girls, within the school. Other students who did not see themselves as belonging to these two extremes of the school community nevertheless defined themselves in relation to them as 'in betweens' (Eckert 1997: 69). The linguistic patterns also mirrored this categorisation, with the burnout girls having the strongest local urban accent overall, and the jock girls having the strongest suburban accent.

The performance of identity through language can be also asserted in a positive way by minority groups who want to maintain their difference from other social groups. In a study of a group of high-school girls in California, Mary Bucholtz shows how they use language to negotiate gender and construct aspects of their identity as 'nerd girls'.

Nerds, like Jocks and Burnouts, to a great extent consciously choose and display their identities through language and other social practices. And where other scholars tend to equate nerdiness with social death, I propose that nerds in US high schools are not socially isolated misfits, but competent members of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice.

(Bucholtz 1999: 211)

This community is characterised linguistically through the girls' use of super-standard and hyper-correct accents and grammar, the use of formal lexical items, and an orientation to aspects of language form such as punning, parody and word-coingage (Bucholtz, 1999: 212).

Other investigations have also revealed that even slight variation can be significant enough to signal affiliation with one group and, correspondingly, disaffiliation with another. Beth Thomas (1988) found that, in a mining community in south Wales, women who lived on the same street used different sounds from each other according to whether they attended either the Congregational, Methodist or Baptist church locally. The variation was therefore linked to the particular religious community which the women belonged to and identified with. Labov (1972a), in his study of the island community in Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, also noted the variation between the speech patterns of those islanders who identified with the traditional fishing community, even among those who had left the island to go to college but had later returned to take up employment there, and the summer community of holidaymakers from the mainland. The sound changes he identified clearly functioned to establish the local inhabitants who identified with the island's traditional fishing industry as different from the visitors and those involved with them.

The process can also work the other way, when speakers adopt the speech patterns of a group they do not belong to, but which, for whatever reason, they see as prestigious, or they aspire to belong to. This can be a short-term strategy, where a speaker temporarily moves towards the speech of a group for a particular communicative effect, or a long-term one, where speakers gradually shift their patterns of speech to match those of the target group. The short-term occasional strategic use of the speech of another group has been termed crossing by Ben Rampton (1995) in his study of the use of creole in Britain by outgroup speakers (in this case adolescents whose ethnic backgrounds were white Anglo, Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani). He found that their perception of creole as tough and cool meant that its use was 'strongly tied to a sense of youth and class identity':

Informants generally credited black adolescents with the leading role in the multiracial vernacular, introducing elements that others subsequently adopted. In this way, for example, 'innit' was analysed as being originally black, and young people most often ascribed Creole roots to new words in the local English vernacular.

(Rampton 1995: 128)

Some varieties of language are more prestigious than others, and what counts as the prestige form can vary according to the context and type of linguistic
activity. One example of this was in the early 1960s, when British pop singers often produced sounds (such as the vowel sounds in words such as dance, girl, life or love) with stereotypical American pronunciation. One explanation that has been suggested for this is that, because of long-standing American domination within the field of popular music, British singers were attempting 'to model their singing style on that of those who do it best and who one admires most' (Trudgill 1983b: 144). As the status of British pop music rose during the 1960s and early 1970s, this feature became less frequent, and, with the advent of punk rock music and 'new wave' bands in the mid-1970s, whose 'primary audience was British urban working-class youth' (Trudgill 1983b: 154), things changed again. The use of American features declined, while non-standard, low-prestige features associated with southern English pronunciation (such as a glottal stop in a word such as better) and non-standard grammatical forms (such as multiple negation in I can't get no . . . ) became more frequent, as these bands moved towards adopting a British working-class identity. These non-standard, covert prestige forms have not replaced the American sounds in British pop music, but rather co-exist with them.

ACTIVITY 9.2

Think of any 'in' words or phrases which are used currently by your own peer group. What kind of words are they? Where do they come from? What happens if someone outside your peer group uses them? Why do you think this is the case?

9.5 Linguistic variation and the construction of identity

In this section we discuss how people can shift between different styles of speaking, varying the features of their accent and dialect which contribute to the construction of a particular social identity at different moments and in different situations.

9.5.1 Stylistic variation and language choice

Defining common systems of representation and adherence to ingroup linguistic norms are not the only means by which people display their affiliation to (or disaffiliation from) a social group. We also position ourselves in relation to others by the way that we talk in different kinds of interaction. People do not always talk in exactly the same way all the time: they don't always pronounce words the same way, and they don't always use the same grammatical forms (for example you was rather than you were). This kind of variation in speech is usually referred to as style-shifting (see also Chapter 8).

One of the theories explaining this variation in style is that speakers take into account whom they are talking to, and alter their speech style accordingly. This concept of audience design (Bell 1984) provides a theoretical account of the reasons why speakers change the way they talk depending on the situation and context they are talking in. This account is based on the premise that people are mainly seeking to show solidarity and approval in their dealings with others, and one way that speakers can do this is through linguistic convergence, i.e. by changing their patterns of speech to fit more closely with those of the person they happen to be talking to (Giles and Powesland 1975; Giles and Sinclair 1979).

Linguistic convergence can, however, backfire, as it can be perceived by the hearer as patronizing, ingratiating or even mocking behaviour. This is particularly the case when standard speakers converge towards non-standard, low-prestige forms. The imitation of another person's speech can be interpreted as linguistic behaviour that is designed to insult, by emphasising the difference between speakers, rather than behaviour that is designed to display solidarity. In a study of young adolescents' use of creole in London, Roger Hewitt found that young black creole speakers were usually quite hostile to their white peers' use of creole, which was perceived not just as parody but as a display of power:

white Creole use was regarded (a) as derisive parody, and hence as an assertion of white superiority, and (b) as a further white appropriation of one of the sources of power -- 'it seems as if they are stealing our language'.

(Hewitt 1986: 162)

There seems, then, to be a relationship between social questions of power and status, and the way in which speakers accommodate to each other in their use of language. Who converges with whom is an important issue in any speech situation where the participants have different social status. In some situations, speakers may choose not to converge, but instead either to maintain their own variety (linguistic maintenance) or move to a more extreme variety of their dialect (linguistic divergence), in order to emphasise the difference between themselves and the person or people they are talking
to. An example of this comes from Jenny Cheshire’s (1982) study of the use of non-standard English in adolescent peer groups in Reading, England. Cheshire recorded her informants’ speech both within the peer group and within the more formal setting of the classroom. In line with common practice, most of her informants produced more standard forms in school, converging with the standard norms of the institutional environment. One of her informants, however, increased his use of non-standard forms, diverging from the expected linguistic variety and thus emphasizing his distance from and non-acceptance of the school’s norms. Viv Edwards (1997) reports similar linguistic signals given by children who diverge from expected norms by using their variety of Black English in the classroom as an expression not only of solidarity with the black peer group but of distance from and exclusion of the outgroup (teachers and/or white children).

Speakers may wish to be identified with different groups at different times, and their linguistic patterns may produce a shift, whether between different varieties of a language or from one language to another. The question of group affiliation and identity can determine the choices a speaker makes about how to speak and, for bilinguals or multilinguals, which language to use.

When a choice is made between two different languages, the question of identity becomes even more marked, particularly when the choice is bound up with the national and political status of a language. Monica Heller (1982) describes how, in Quebec, speakers have to deal with the issue of which language to use before the business of the talk gets under way. In choosing French rather than English, or vice versa, speakers are always making a statement about how they align themselves in terms of national and political identities. Heller describes an instance of a call to a bilingual hospital where the conversation between the hospital clerk and the patient has been conducted in English, until the clerk reads out the patient’s name (Robert Saint Pierre) in French. The caller corrects the clerk angrily, by repeating his name using the English pronunciation, thereby claiming his identity as an English speaker despite the ‘Frenchness’ of his name (Heller 1982: 118).

9.5.2 Power and linguistic imperialism

A sense of cultural identity is often centred on a particular language, and speakers’ perceptions of the connection between the languages they use and that identity is well documented (see for example Gumperz 1982a; Alladina and Edwards 1991; Gal 1998). Language rights and recognition are often important issues in socio-political conflicts all around the world. Maintenance of a minority language within a majority culture (such as Spanish in the United States, Gujarati in Britain) is often associated with the maintenance of a minority’s values and with the continuation of its unique cultural identity (see Chapter 6). In Wales, bilingualism is actively maintained through policies such as teaching in Welsh-medium schools, a Welsh television channel (S4C) and the distribution of all official documents in both English and Welsh. Although not everyone in Wales speaks Welsh, this type of support for the Welsh language contributes to the strong sense of cultural and national identity of Welsh people. For younger people, the phrase ‘cool Cymru’ has also come to signify this sense of cultural identity through its association with the music of Welsh bands such as Catatonia and the Manic Street Preachers.

Loss of a language can also be associated with a loss of cultural identity. Languages can be lost for a variety of reasons. For example, speakers may choose to shift from one language to another as social conditions change, or one language may be imposed and another suppressed by a dominant power. In the fictional account below of the historical relationship between Denmark and Greenland, the principal character draws on the intricate relationship between language and identity and describes her feeling that in losing her ability to speak her mother tongue, she is also losing her Greenlandic identity:

When we moved from the village school to Qaqasaaq, we had teachers who didn’t know one word of Greenlandic, nor did they have any plans to learn it. They told us that, for those who excelled, there would be an admission ticket to Denmark and a degree and a way out of the Arctic misery. This golden ascent would take place in Danish. This was when the foundation was being laid for the politics of the sixties. Which led to Greenland officially becoming ‘Danmark’s northernmost county’, and the limit were officially supposed to be called ‘Northern Danes’ and ‘be educated to the same rights as all other Danes’, as the prime minister put it. That’s how the foundation is laid. Then you arrive in Denmark and six months pass and it feels as if you will never forget your mother tongue. It’s the language you think in, they way you remember your past. Then you meet a Greenlander on the street. You exchange a few words. And suddenly you have to search for a completely ordinary word. Another six months pass. A girlfriend takes you along to the Greenlanders’ House on Lov Lane. That’s where you discover that your own Greenlandic can be picked apart with a fingernail.

(Hoeg 1996: 105)

The passage also illustrates the implications that language use has for wider issues of social, ethnic and national identities. The reference here to the passage to Danish education as ‘the golden ascent’ which ‘would take place in Danish’
shows how the ability to speak a language can either make possible or restrict access to social and institutional structures, privileging one community of speakers over another.

9.6 Summary

In this chapter we have looked at the construction of personal identities through the use of names and systems of address, and at the construction of group identity through types of representation and adherence to linguistic norms. We have seen how linguistic variation plays a part in the expression of solidarity with, or distance from, group norms, and how language is connected with cultural identity. In this way we have investigated linguistic identity from the point of view of the individual and the group, as well as the institutional and cultural practices of a community of speakers. As always, however useful these categories have been for the purposes of discussion, in practice they overlap and the boundaries between them are probably less clearly defined than is perhaps implied here. The relationship between language and identity will always involve a complex mix of individual, social and political factors which work to construct people as belonging to a social group, or to exclude them from it.

Suggestions for further reading

The question of identity is a thread that runs through many studies in sociolinguistics. This is reflected to a large extent in many of the chapters in this book which have been concerned with identities of gender, age, ethnicity and social class, so much of the reading already suggested will be relevant here. However, one of the first collections bringing together a variety of work in this area is:


If you want to read a concise and interesting critical account of research in language and social identity, try: