

[Review] Siân Preece (2016) The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity

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Siân Preece (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* (Routledge Handbooks in Applied Linguistics), London: Routledge, 2016; + 644 pp. £140.38 (hbk).

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Like others in the same series, the *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* offers a timely review of a major sub-discipline within applied linguistics. The book is marketed as a reference tool for a general academic readership from (Applied) Linguistics, Education and TESOL, a breadth that is reflected in the range of its contributor backgrounds. The Handbook is organised in five parts: theoretical perspectives on language and identity (seven chapters); social determinants (eight chapters); research approaches and considerations (five chapters); case studies (eleven chapters); and discussions around future trends (six chapters). Most of the contributors take either a social constructionist or poststructuralist approach to understanding identity, which is defined by Joseph in the opening chapter as 'who individuals are, understood in terms of the group to which they belong' (p. 25).

In his discussion of the relation between language and speaker identity, theorised historically as arbitrary, pragmatic, reflective or causal, Joseph presents an early version of the micro-macro, or agency-structure, model adopted by many of the contributors. Associated with it are two constructs, intersubjectivity and context-contingency, which refer to how language defines and regulates the person within the group while simultaneously constructing the group (p. 22). The recognition and analysis of this reflexivity is crucial to any understanding of structuration, the 'meso-level' proposed between agency and structure (p. 321).

What Block calls 'key identity markers' (p 245), viz ethnicity, race, (trans)nationality (and post-colonial contexts), religion, gender and sexuality, are discussed in seven of the eight chapters in Section II. On the basis that the foregoing are cultural in nature, Block argues that class is different as it concerns the distribution of material sources and, Block suggests, deserves more consideration as a construct in language and identity research. The five chapters of Section III discuss the challenges for language and identity studies that adopt a poststructural perspective, namely ethics, heteroglossia, researcher reflexivity and the practical implications of identifying, collecting and transcribing spoken data. The role played by spoken interaction in negotiating identity at the local discursive level and its contribution to and constraint on the regulatory mechanisms of discourse is the subject of the final chapter in the section. Horner and Bellamy (Chapter 20) introduce the notion of an interface between language and identity, in which ethnography and discourse analysis, employed as data by the majority of empirical studies in the Handbook, are important means of enquiry. In this respect, the chapter is pivotal and references a number of sociological paradigms that attempt to resolve similar distinctions between structure and agency.

Neither the contents of Section II nor the case studies in Section IV restrict themselves to traditional sociolinguistic variables. Apart from age, sexuality, class, disability, and

nationalism, the cases in Section IV include the more esoteric CLIL teacher identity, culture, expertise, political identity, speech style, and language itself, variously classified as content-based, second, heritage, minority, and community - an example of the essentialist potential of language to confer identity. One means of bridging the gap between agency and structure is to deny their existence as separate phenomena and to focus via the interactional discourse, or other linguistic data, on their 'mutually constitutive' (p. 331) relationship. In this regard, two of the case studies stand out. In Chapter 25 on disability and institutional practices, Hjörne and Evaldsson analyse a series of data extracts to trace the construction and imposition of a stigmatized identity on Annika, the focal participant. The other chapter in which the agency–structure interface is made explicit, but this time with agents redefining the language system, is Edwards (Chapter 31). Edwards reports that for indigenous and migrant Scots, the Gaelic language is no more than a symbol of nationality, having little potential as a demotic means of communication, even for learners. Thus, when Preece asserts that it is 'foregrounded' (p. 5) in the collection, language has to be understood as the instantiation of both interaction and system. In that context, the case studies assume a wider significance. Finally, the six chapters in Section V, 'Future directions', comprise an eclectic mix of: approaches (intersectionality), language mode or communicative setting (digital communication, language learning and teaching), ideology (neoliberal discourses), and contemporary concerns (about authenticity, hybridity, and research(er) ethics).

A substantive discussion of the epistemology of identity beyond the allusion to differences in occidental–oriental understandings of its nature and significance (p. 24) would provide a wider framework for the Handbook, and the interest of individual contributions must depend largely on the reader. However, with their exploration of a single issue and their discursive nature, the theoretical chapters are generally more coherent and thought-provoking than those reporting empirical findings or dealing with methodological problems. The range of variables related to identity indicates how virtually anything that can be accessed directly or indirectly via language, including 'beliefs, attitudes, [and] emotions' (p. 98), could be construed as a marker; and because language is ubiquitous in human affairs, its function in identity research becomes potentially limitless. Without rigorous operationalisation of concepts, reflexivity and triangulation, its treatment may be so wide as to be useless, representing a potential weakness in the discipline.

Lending a unifying structure to the eclectic mix of contributions is a repeated quotation from Brumfit (1995, 1997) and the organization of each chapter into overview, substantive issue (or methodology, data and discussion in Section IV), summary, related topics within the Handbook, further reading, and chapter reference list. The index combines subject and author but is not completely reliable, eg in addition to the four pages cited for Brumfit, there are five others (pp. 162, 320, 396, 414, and 454); and typos are occasionally evident, the most noticeable being the order of references (p. 15 and p. 332). The aim of the Handbook is to offer 'a comprehensive overview of key topics in the study of language and identity' (p. 1) and in this it succeeds. It adds to our understanding of the relationships between language use and socio-political structures and the associated construction of identities in a number of unexpected and insightful

ways. The Handbook not only comprises a basic source of reference on current approaches to the investigation of language and identity but, for the newcomer, it provides rationales, models and inspiration for further work.

References

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