

Sheryl Sawyer

Exploring identity construction: A case study from an online forum

Tekst i Dyskurs = Text und Diskurs 6, 241-261

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Sheryl Sawyer (Hamilton)

Exploring identity construction: A case study from an online forum

Without access to physical cues normally present in face-to-face interaction or extralinguistic information, like ethnographic background or physical attributes, multiple salient online identities, (collectively labelled as a personal identity cluster), can be crafted by exploiting the tools available within the online medium. By examining the language choices of a single participant to an online discussion board, it is shown how identity can be created through interaction, utilizing principles of emergence, indexicality (labels, stances), relationality (positive and negative), and positionality (temporary roles) and partialness. Identity, as described through the standpoint of sociocultural linguistics, is thereby a performance created for and modified through interaction with others. Examples from a case study are shown to validate and enrich this theoretical position.

Badanie tworzenia tożsamości na przykładzie forum internetowego

W komunikacji za pośrednictwem internetu uczestnicy muszą obejść się bez informacji pozajęzykowych, które są normalnie dostępne w komunikacji bezpośredniej, takich jak pochodzenie czy wygląd. Dlatego w kontekście komunikacji online możliwe jest tworzenie różnorodnych tożsamości (zwanych zbiorczo zlepkami tożsamości osobowych) przy wykorzystaniu jedynie środków dostępnych w tym medium. Analizując wybory językowe jednego uczestnika forum dyskusyjnego, autorka pokazuje jak można skonstruować tożsamość poprzez interakcję. W swoich badaniach autorka używa pięciu reguł tworzenia takich tożsamości zaproponowanych przez Bucholtz i Hall w 2005: zasady pojawiania się, indeksowania (etykiet, podejścia), zależności (pozytywnej i negatywnej), reguły pozycyjności (tymczasowych ról) oraz zasady złożoności. Tożsamość, opisana z punktu widzenia lingwistyki socjo-kulturowej, jest więc definiowana jako produkt, który jest wynikiem komunikowania się z innymi. Przykłady zaczerpnięte z badań autorki nad internetowym forum dyskusyjnym potwierdzają tę teorię i oferują możliwości jej dalszego rozwinięcia.

Die Untersuchung der Identitätskonstruktion dargestellt am Beispiel der Online-Forums

In der Online-Kommunikation, anders als es in der direkten Kommunikation der Fall ist, haben die Kommunikationspartner keine Informationen über ihre Herkunft oder das Aussehen. Aus die-

sem Grund entsteht die Notwendigkeit, in der Online-Kommunikation die Identität (auch Konglomerat von Identitäten genannt) mittels sprachlicher Mittel, die in der online Kommunikation zugänglich sind, auf unterschiedliche Art und Weise herzustellen. Die Autorin zeigt, wie man durch eine Online-Interaktion die Identität konstruieren kann, indem die Sprache eines Teilnehmers von Online-Diskussionsforum analysiert wird. Dabei bezieht sich die Autorin auf fünf Regeln der Identitätskonstruierung, die von Bucholtz und Hall (2005) entwickelt wurden, z. B. das Prinzip der Emergenz, der Indexikalität, der Relationalität, der Positionalität und der Komplexität. Aus der Perspektive der sozio-kulturellen Linguistik ist die Identität ein Produkt, das erst in der Interaktion entsteht. Die angeführten Beispiele bestätigen die Theorie und bieten die Möglichkeit ihrer weiteren Entwicklung.

1. Introduction

One's identity is often seen as something tangible – something that can be determined from a person's physical being or personality traits. Within sociocultural linguistics, however, identity is also a social construct, shaped and defined by situation and through interaction with others – and the way we do that as humans is largely through the language we use to interact.

In the following case study, one individual's postings to an online commenting forum are analyzed to construct a cluster of identities based on the linguistic cues within the text. With careful microanalysis of linguistic cues within the forum comments, we are able to understand the identity cluster being performed by this individual (username *justcase*, in italics throughout) within this context.

For this analysis, I rely on the technical definition of the word 'identity' as: "...the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore [...] a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon" or as "...the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz/Hall 2005) as expressed in the five principles of emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality and partialness (ibid.). In this view, identity is not a personal projection of beliefs, values and stances but is instead a collaborative effort between self and others.

1.1. Language and Identity

Language occupies a privileged position in identity construction. It is through language we express our ideologies, our abstract thoughts and interact with those around us. Through this interaction, we jointly construct our social realities. Language is a very important factor in identity construction, though by no means the only one available to us. Biological and genetic considerations certainly play a role. Choice of clothing, hairstyle, and lifestyle can aid in identity construction.

Paralinguistic cues like gestures, facial expressions and prosodic information can be part of the construction of our social identities. Categorizing identity through language is not merely a process of 'reading' identity through linguistic features, as illustrated by the inability to 'read' gender through mapping linguistic form to social meaning (Ochs 1992).

Identity then, from a sociocultural standpoint, is an intersubjective process of creation and not a property of isolated individuals or projections of mental states. Richly co-constructed social identities position the self and other in complex social relations by utilizing intersubjective relationship tactics and semiotic processes including:

- a. emergence, the notion that identity is the product that emerges in linguistic and other semiotic actions between people, rather than the mentalistic categorization of social category of the self;
- b. positionality, the concept that identity emerges from both broad social categories and temporarily performed positions;
- c. indexicality, which holds that various indexical actions highlight identity relations, including stance and labeling;
- d. relationality, that identities emerge through positive and negative relation pairs and
- e. partialness, the idea that any construction of identity is necessarily part of a complex of various identity expressions.

These principles (Bucholtz/Hall 2005), taken together, indicate how identities are created through interaction. Not merely a mentalistic construct within one's mind, they are instead a cultural and social product of encounters with others. Thus, identity (co)-construction is positioned at the crossroads of language, society and culture. In this view, identity is not an outward expression of an inner persona; rather, identity is a currency that is constantly presented and renegotiated among members of a community

Bucholtz and Hall coin the umbrella term *sociocultural linguistics* in a series of articles (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008a, 2008b) to describe an approach "to place culture at the center of scholarly inquiry about language and society". Their vision of an inclusive approach to the topic is summed thus: "...these [diverse] fields do not come together under a single disciplinary banner but rather forge an alliance or coalition that fosters dialogue and collaboration between complementary approaches" (Bucholtz/Hall 2008b).

Work in the area of identity in language has its roots in the relationship between language and culture. Linguistic anthropologists focused on the ethnography of speaking, later revised to the ethnography of communication (Hymes

1962). Work on framing (Goffman 1974) and conversation analysis (Sacks/Schlegeloff/Jefferson 1974) continued to emphasize the importance of language use in interaction as a social construct. Austin's (1975) speech act theory, one of the cornerstone founding principles of pragmatics, is also an important contributor to social meaning and social identity. It became clear that what one *does* through language says a great deal about one's social identity.

Sociolinguistics introduced the notion of *speech communities* in which speaking was seen as a cultural activity, expressed linguistically in terms of social dialect and language variation in communities. William Labov, in his groundbreaking work on urban language varieties (Labov 1966), showed that linguistic variables previously thought to be in free variation (e.g. vowel quality and length), with standard varieties of English were instead tightly reflected in disparate speech communities within a given standard. The concept of a 'community of practice' allows for making finer distinctions within speech communities. A community of practice is defined as "an aggregate of people who come together around a mutual engagement in an endeavor" (Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 1992).

In the 1990s, work on identity in language has gained extensive currency from studies of language and gender. In the case of gender, there is a move away from specifying isolated linguistic features to index gender and instead a move toward depending more on speech acts and what different genders do within society than what they say or even how they say it (Ochs 1992). As social constructs, gender identities are not necessarily reflected in particular linguistic phenomena but are instead mediated by stances, social acts, social activities and other social constructs. Evaluative stances can be epistemic, displaying (un)certainly or (lack of) knowledge. They can also be affective, displaying emotion or intensity. Because social identity is rarely grammaticalized, interactional stances mediate between linguistic structure on one hand and identity category on the other (Bucholtz/Hall 2008b).

Participants in an online news commenting forum are engaged in the common action of adding their opinions to a news story. Their audience is each other, fellow posters, and to a certain extent, the wider readership of the story and of the comment board itself who may not choose to contribute. Individuals who choose to comment are moved to add their voices to the discussion and thereby constitute a very narrow community of practice. The uniting concept in these approaches (anthropological, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) comes together in the methodologies and theories behind sociocultural linguistics – that language is a singularly important method for humans to know their cultures and themselves and that it is not merely reflective of society but constitutive of it.

1.2. Identity construction

The following paper shows how identity clusters can be co-constructed between members of the online community by utilizing positions, relationality and indexicality through analysis of comments made by an individual poster. At the same time, the principles of emergence and partialness, while important to keep in the fore as we explore identity construction online, are more broadly auxiliary concepts that are applicable in all instances of identity co-construction. That is, it is helpful to remember that all identities emerge as the result of cooperative social action (emergence) and that all identities are necessarily incomplete (partialness).

The concept of an identity cluster takes the partialness principle as a given – that at any time, we are portraying multiple aspects of our personal identity clusters. Some aspects of these may be highlighted more or less in any given interaction, but all are considered to be at work in identity construction through interaction. The term identity cluster is apt, as it illustrates that, at any time, we explore, address and express different versions of our social selves. Identity clusters are created in conjunction with other of our expressed social identities. At the same time we are co-creating nested social identities in concert with other social actors who are creating their own.

Indexicality is an important concept in research on identity that arises from linguistic anthropology. In fact, Michael Silverstein asserts that “...any linguistic, a.k.a. sociolinguistic, fact is necessarily an indexical fact” (Silverstein 2003). Direct indexical relations are those that directly reference a person or entity with language. Personal pronouns offer examples of direct indexical relations. The first-person singular pronoun ‘I’ is unambiguous, whereas the use of the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ is ambiguous in English. It can be unclear which group is constitutive of ‘we’. It can be an inclusive ‘we’, an exclusive ‘we’ or an impersonal ‘we’ as in the scientific neutral or the so-called ‘Royal we’. The use of the second-person plural can be an important cue in identity construction, indicating group membership or exclusion, for example.

Work on indexicality began with Bakhtin’s (Bakhtin/Holquist 1981) concept of multiple voices being present in any utterance. This intertextuality of language use means that our utterances are laden with layers of social meanings derived from various historical and contemporary sources. In this way, participants in the news forum in the data analysed below are often aware of and comment on other social issues that inform their work in identity construction as an interactional activity.

Crucial to the development of identity construction from a sociocultural linguistic perspective is the idea of stance as the attitude an interlocutor displays toward the topic or speaker at hand. Related to indexicality, stances are a property

of social interaction rather than individual value judgments (White 2003) and can be evaluative, affective or epistemological in nature, displaying a position of alignment or disalignment with another speaker or group of speakers in a given group. A repertoire of momentary stances can be seen as a display of a personal style (Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 2003) in identity displays as speakers take particular points of view or social positions.

The positionality principle, as expressed through Bucholtz and Hall's socio-cultural linguistics approach, concerns temporary roles in discourse. Roles such as storyteller, sympathetic friend, lecturer or accommodating stranger are as involved in identity creation as are broader social and cultural categories.

1.3 Online Identity

The genre of online commenting is a fairly new one. The Internet has been part of daily life in North America for at most a couple of decades, depending on factors like roles in society or socioeconomic status (i.e. scientists first had access to the early Internet, and affluence has played a large role in access to the Internet at home for many families). A 2013 report indicates that 82.68% of Canadians have access to the Internet (CIRA, 2013). As more and more people are able to access information online, they are also able to participate in online discussion groups. Commenting on news stories is a newer development than web logs (blogs), which are a product of the late 1990s (Blood 2000). As such, the discussion of identity with respect to this genre is fairly limited. Online identity with respect to user groups and MUDs (multi-user dimensions) has focused on the sociolinguistic tradition of the speech community (Cherny 1999), the pragmatic placement of norms and turn-taking from a Conversation Analysis framework (Antaki, Ardévol, Núñez, & Vayreda, 2005) and ethnography of community-building (Baym, 1998). Other researchers have focused on online identity in terms of the creation of selfhood or in the protection of identity from theft or criminal activity (Milne/Rohm/Bahl 2004).

Work has been done on instantly interactive media like gaming or chatting online with respect to creating (often false) gender and social identities (Subrahmanyam/Greenfield/Tynes 2004). In Subrahmanyam et al's paper, the focus is on the displaying of sexual identity as a developmental phase in adolescence and as an extension of their offline lives. Subrahmanyam et al's (2004) study, while focused on socialization in adolescence more than identity construction itself, shows that online identities are agentively displayed and are as salient as their offline counterparts.

The online commenting forum is not instantly interactive. It operates more like a bulletin board, where posters can respond to whatever notices they see 'up

on the board'. On the other hand, commenting forums like the one analysed here are often moderated, allowing for intervention in the event a comment is unsuitable according to the official CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) policy on commenting (Canadian Broadcasting Company 2012). On the CBC website, the terms of use for online commenting on news stories are moderated, but there were very few (less than 5) comments in this data set that actually stated "this comment was removed by the moderator", leading the author to believe that the standards are fairly lax for intervening moderation.

Online commenting has several features both in common with and different from face-to-face interaction. For instance, online commenting allows for a 'stream of consciousness' type of conversation without giving much forethought to what one will say, similar to interactive forms of speech either online or face to face. At the very same time, it is possible to plot out very carefully what one would like to project – to plan a solid logical argument, find resources to back up one's claims and edit and spell check one's entry, in much the same way one might plan a letter to the editor of a (print) newspaper. A difference between online commenting and face-to-face discussions is the ability to retract a piece of what is said, or reject the entire message before posting it. Online commenting may indeed function much more like an old-fashioned letter to the editor than a face-to-face conversation.

With respect to identity practice, online commenting favours a different set of tools than do face-to-face or spoken communication. Rather than relying on physical semiotic clues (facial expression, prosody, gestures), online conversations use solely text-based means to express identity. In this way, identity creation is less of a cooperative construction and is more in the hands of the individual creator. Reactions and cross-posting can help create and reinforce shades of identity in online commenting; however, the process is slower and less precise due to the asynchronous nature of the forum. As shown in the data analysis below, this asynchronous quality of the online news commenting forum makes indexicality, relationality and positionality useful tools in identity creation online, where physical cues other than linguistic form (e.g. gesture, prosody) cannot be accessed.

2. Data

The data that follow are from the comments posted in response to an online news story on CBC.ca in 2009. While the data are older, the topic and its timing were particularly salient. In the United States, there have been multiple legal challenges regarding the inclusion of a theory of the origins of the universe known as "intelligent design". A particularly high-profile case was *Kitzmiller v. Dover*

(National Center for Science Education, 2008), in which a Pennsylvania school board was chastised for attempting to insert supernatural creationism alongside the scientific theory of evolution. A Canadian professor, Dr. Brian Alters, was an expert witness in the case. After returning to Canada, Dr. Alters' grant application for a sociological study into the attitudes toward evolution and intelligent design in schools in Canada, was denied. In the letter outlining the denial of his grant proposal, the SSHRC committee claimed they could not find "justification for the assumption in the proposal that the theory of evolution, and not intelligent-design theory, was correct" (The Ottawa Citizen 2006). The granting agency's reasoning surprised many in Canada, a largely secular country, where the issues of including the religiously-based theory of intelligent design had not become a topic of public debate.

A selection of comments from one poster, *justcase*, was carefully examined with respect to principles of identity construction. First, we must understand basic details about the story itself and then explain some of the backstory as to why this topic in particular attracted such a large response.

2.1. Online Story

The news article whose comments I have chosen to examine is one about a decision by the government of the province of Alberta to propose a controversial law allowing parents the right to remove their children from science class in which the scientific theory of evolution may be discussed (Canadian Broadcasting Company 2009). This story aired in April 2009 and was followed by a press conference during which then-Premier of Alberta Ed Stelmach confirmed that the law, which was ostensibly tabled in order to bestow further human rights upon persons of homosexual orientation, also included the right for parents to exclude their children from classes about evolution. The original information about the bill does not explicitly mention the theory of evolution. From the news story:

"The new rules, which would require schools to notify parents in advance of "subject-matter that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality or sexual orientation," is buried in a bill that extends human rights to homosexuals. Parents can ask for their child to be excluded from the discussion." (Canadian Broadcasting Company 2009)

The news that Stelmach "...has confirmed the bill will give parents the authority to exclude their kids from classes if the topic of evolution comes up..." spurred a storm of public commentary on the Canadian Broadcasting Company's website. Later news stories indicated that the Minister of Education retracted

that interpretation, but the news story as written on April 30, 2009 generated a large number of comments both positive and negative. There were in total 3,368 comments – most of which appear to be of the knee-jerk variety, passing quick judgment on the legislators, the province, the theory of evolution, or on religion in general. A number of replies and cross-replies were included in the analysis, many of which are quite inflammatory.

2.2. The analysis of data

There were 1,187 unique usernames who penned 3,368 comments to this forum. It is likely that the majority of those usernames were from unique posters, but it is possible that a single person could assume multiple usernames. *Justcase* was the username of the most prolific participant, who authored 139 comments over 25 days, with an average word count of 101 words, (not including quotative words). Many individuals argued extensively with *justcase* – their opinions were generally at odds with him¹. *Justcase*'s biggest rivals in this forum were *Western Separatist* and *Gunslinger777* (also using the name *Jaydude777*). I have chosen to focus on the most prolific poster, *justcase*, in order to exemplify identity co-construction as accomplished by that particular user in interaction with others in the forum.

Justcase expresses his views on evolution, education and religion with conviction and enthusiasm, making his comments particularly well-suited to exploration from an identity construction standpoint. In doing so, he constructs an identity cluster as a heterosexual male, a scientist, an atheist and likely not a parent. Other roles he plays in the discourse are those of a teacher persona, an “honest skeptic”, a concerned citizen and someone with little patience for dishonesty as he sees it reflected in religion and religious activity. Almost all of *justcase*'s comments are direct replies to other posters – only 10 of his 139 posts are not directly linked through a quotative display to another poster. This deeply interactive activity is crucial as *justcase* constructs an identity in concert with others' comments.

What follows is a close analysis of the comments posted by *justcase* as he constructs multiple online identities, especially enriched by appealing to the partialness principle outlined above. According to this principle, our identities are an ever-changing value. We are never fully ensconced in only one identity.

¹ The assumption that *justcase* is male will be explained in the next section.

2.3. *Identity Display: justcase as heterosexual male*

Gender can be viewed as “a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities, not simply a system for categorizing people” (Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 2003). *Justcase* presents a strongly male-gendered identity without explicitly labeling himself as such and at the same time repeatedly denies he is a homosexual, thereby creating a heterosexual male identity in the process. *Justcase* uses third-person pronouns and verbs, as in example (1) to show a denial by distancing himself from homosexuality.

- (1) “...did gay people tell you it was a choice? Because last time I checked **they** are the #1 source of information on the conscious choices made by gay people...”²

Another distinction tactic is more obvious, an absolute denial as in (2) and his mention of a girlfriend in (3):

- (2) “...**I’m not one** and yet I have no problem seeing **people who are**, are still people, didn’t do anything wrong, and shouldn’t be treated badly or denied the same rights and privileges as anyone else.”
- (3) “...don’t worry I know a lot of people won’t agree with me that this *soft science* seems not to understand the scientific method either but you can some take some gratification in that **my last girlfriend certainly didn’t agree with me**, is doing the same thing, and would probably slap me for even writing this to you.”

Justcase’s attitude toward gay rights is supportive, however. He describes negative attitudes toward homosexuality, e.g. calling homosexuality non-natural or conscious lifestyle choice as not only wrong, but labels these attitudes as “evil”, a term that can connote a lexical dichotomy with the opposite term ‘good’. In offering his personal stance toward these attitudes as evil, he aligns himself as on the side of ‘good’ when it comes to gay rights. In example (4), he also frames homosexual people as victims who are unable to do anything to de-victimize themselves from this condition, while offering another explicit denial of his own homosexuality.

² A note on conventions: All comments have been faithfully reproduced, including grammatical and spelling errors present in the original, with the exception of formatting. *Justcase* did not use any bold or italics in formatting his statements; here used both italics to distinguish the comments from the main text and boldface type to highlight salient parts of the comments.

- (4) "...As far as I'm concerned **I can't understand what it is to be homosexual** but despite that, acting like that is a lifestyle choice rather than innate nature looks to me to be the same as choosing to be born with a particular skin color, or to choose what your height will be..."

Justcase displays his masculine identity by positioning himself at a macro-level as a male and through culturally positioning himself as not homosexual. With respect to indexicality, the overt label 'not homosexual' positions himself as either heterosexual or belonging to an alternate, transgendered group. He avoids this implicature by mentioning he had a girlfriend. The absence of consideration of the trans-gender possibility is also telling, positioning himself in the unmarked category that needs no mention. By extension, his epistemic stance as strongly supportive of homosexual rights allows him to position himself in a benevolent position toward a marginalized group. Similarly, the principle of relationality is displayed nicely through distinction, effectively voicing 'I am not a homosexual'.

2.4. Identity Display: justcase as Scientist

Justcase explicitly refers to his computer science degree, himself as a scientist, or uses the first-person plural pronoun when referring to scientists, a practice that serves to discursively give him as authority as an expert, qualified to comment on what is and what is not science in this forum.

- (5) "...**my science degree** is computer science, not biology..."

Another technique he uses to legitimize his identity performance as scientist is his insistence that science and the scientific method are, above all, honest. He uses that as a distinction tactic to distance himself from religion, which he describes as based on lies and mistruths. References to "fundies" and "xombies", in examples, are also interesting. A "fundie" is a diminution of "fundamentalist religious person", someone whose religious views follow a strict and quite literal translation of their holy texts. In this context, "xombie" is particularly inflammatory, combining the notion of the risen Christ (a literary zombie is a being, formerly dead, who rises again to walk) with the secular practice of writing "Xmas" instead of "Christmas", using an 'x' (a cross) in place of 'Christ'. Referring to Christians who interpret the Christian Bible literally as "fundies" and "xombies" is deeply disrespectful and intended to inflame.

He makes many accusations of misleading or lying in religion as illustrated in the following selected comments:

- (6) “...**That’s a lie** - ...

Once again **you are lying about the very MEANING of science**, so you can fight with it, because you don’t know how to fight REAL science. Just as people here have been inventing their own version of “evolution” (and **lying about it**) **and then trying to fight that because it’s so much easier to fight lies with lies**. Isn’t that right, fundies?...”

- (7) “...that’s a **lie either based in having no education**, or in trying to make people shun education and truth, just like I expect from **fundie xombie liars**... you believe only in xombie-lies so you can’t understand truth...”

Justcase makes much of the “honest” process in science – and, since he has already established himself as a scientist, effectively endows himself with the same honesty.

- (8) “...Science is for **people that know more questions must follow** that are not answered yet...”

- (9) “...Science being built by skeptics, who are trying to be **as honest as possible**, ...”

- (10) “...Science doesn’t push that far yet and **we, as scientists and those who understand and use science all the time** ...”

Justcase claims he has a computer science degree, (5). In support of this claim, many of the explanations he uses to demonstrate the validity of the theory of evolution come from computer programming. In displaying this part of his identity, he uses jargon and examples that are not accessible to the person who does not share this specialized education. Thus, his admonitions to ‘look it up’ and assumptions that his points are being heard and taken can often fall on deaf ears. His attempt at superiority in knowledge fails when he cannot explain his concepts to those who are not in a position to access such knowledge. The example below illustrates the complexity of his explanations when referencing computer programming.

- (11) “...Even computer programs, given a chance to compete in performance against each other, and generated completely at random, will evolve and also add complexity. Only lethality - being removed - will stop that process (and by being efficient, like in nature, more offspring from better parentage will use up those otherwise available resources...”

...All living things are like that, and that's proof of the most basic principles of evolution..."

A general audience cannot be presumed to have detailed knowledge about genetic programming with computers, a fact he may be exploiting by relaying an inappropriate amount of knowledge in order to lend credence to his pronouncements. Adding to the excessive jargon in his responses are words like 'even' and 'just' (12) which, when added as qualifiers to the sentences here, serve to try to diminish the magnitude of the topic at hand.

(12) "...**Just** look at genetic programming..."

This encourages the audience to take a quick glance at a topic which *justcase* is presenting with the adverb 'just' as to minimize its difficulty and complexity. Related to his persistent use of jargon is the identity he constructs in opposition to others who disagree or question his explanations. He uses derogatory language to put them down:

(13) "...That's a **really stupid question**..."

(14) "...If you say it is something it is not, and then argue what it is not is also a wrong thing, then **you are a knuckle-dragger moron**..."

Justcase's identity construction as a scientist is a good example of the emergence principle. His choice of a first-person plural pronoun, as in example (10) includes him in the company of scientists, aligning him with a group whose values he holds. He constructs a part of his identity cluster as a scientist and therefore 'good' in lexical opposition to those he considers fundamentalist religious people who are, in this dichotomy, considered 'bad'. He positions himself as a scientist, evoking the elevated position scientists hold in secular society. In so doing, he evokes a cultural stereotype that scientists are honest, trustworthy and smarter than the general population. He includes himself in that, thus linguistically endowing himself with these qualities.

Relationality plays a large role in his creation of a scientist identity. He creates an identity based on what he is (an honest scientist) in contrast to what he is not (a dishonest religious person). Closely tied with his scientist identity are his atheist and strict schoolmaster/teacher identities in that honesty in science is placed in sharp opposition to what he sees as vast dishonesty in religion. As part of the identity cluster he is constructing, *justcase* the scientist is also a concerned citizen. According to his analysis, society will be ill served by allowing religious

fundamentalists to remove their children from classes where the theory of evolution will be discussed. In the following example (15) *justcase* suggests in strong terms that uneducated children will have a negative impact (will ruin lives) on the future society...

- (15) "...Well, that's somewhat the purpose of government and also school - if you want to teach your kids to be burglars, hookers, crack-addicts, uneducated fundamentalists, society generally does have a say because **your kids will ruin other people's lives later...**"

Indexicality is the most important technique in establishing *justcase*'s identity as a scientist. He displays a strong evaluative stance toward a dichotomy of "science is good, religion is bad" through his lexical choice of calling religious people of a fundamentalist ilk "fundies", often augmenting the word with adjectives or nominal modifiers like "lying" and "liars" and "xombies".

2.5. *Identity Display: justcase as childless*

Justcase makes a couple of comments about children using a possessive pronoun, but he uses the possessive pronouns in an ambiguous context whereby it could mean 'my hypothetical children'.

- (16) "...I'd rather see your children do not better than being burger flippers **servicing my children** and working for them, rather than the other way around..."
- (17) "...We all lose control of **our children** eventually..."

Also absent from *justcase*'s comments, for the most part, are expressions of empathy toward parents and their decision-making dilemmas for their children. While he bemoans the eventual state of society if children are kept from learning evolutionary science, he doesn't express, in this forum, kind words toward anyone else's ideas toward raising children. Views on child-rearing sound like they are those of a person without children, i.e. one who does not identify as a parent.

2.6. *Identity Display: justcase as Atheist*

Justcase expresses an identity as non-religious. He defends atheism as a natural choice for him, in much the same language as he defends homosexuality as

natural. *Justcase* explicitly announces he is an atheist in several posts, indexing the ideological positions inherent in atheism as opposed to religion in general.

- (18) "...I'm deeply offended by that and it's a violation of **my rights as an atheist**. It isn't a CHOICE for me to be an atheist. Whatever human malfunction permits some people to believe in the supernatural, I DO NOT and CAN NOT. It is NOT POSSIBLE for me and it is deeply offensive for me to be forced into it..."
- (19) "...Whatever makes you not an atheist is not part of me. My **nature DEMANDS I be an atheist**. It's like breathing and eating. Instinct. Not a choice..."

Justcase's atheist identity is, of course, a co-construction, developed in his interactions with other posters. His first post, acknowledging his atheist-stance, is in response to another poster broadly categorizing evolution as supporting an "atheistic view". *Justcase* often quotes the poster to whom he is replying in square brackets, as in (20), although not consistently.

- (20) "...[The problem with the evolutionary theory is simply that it implies very very strongly that an atheistic view of our universe is correct.]

How would you know? I'm an atheist and I have no idea what another atheist might conclude is the "view of the universe". A lot of people only have a mental view of what they need and want, and a little more on top, and that's hardly the "universe". A few scientific minds have a broader view, some have a very detailed narrow view in specific fields, and a number of those people aren't atheists either. Scientific American once did a survey of this. Please look it up unless that's boring research for you..."

Comments in support of the atheist stance are many and strong. In the data set examined, there are seventeen different comments where *justcase* either claims to be an atheist, to have little need for faith, worship or belief. He claims often that religion is dangerous and implies that only intellectually inferior or otherwise unbalanced people can accept such "nonsense." Of note are some lexical choices by *justcase*. Often, he refers to religious people of a certain ilk as "fundies", a shortened form for "fundamentalists".

He further uses linguistic ungrammatical negative stereotypes and parody to illustrate his disdain for religion and religious people. This denaturalization serves to separate his identity further from a religious one. In example, he parodies a southern U.S. gospel preacher by mocking the accent and regional forms of

grammar. In example, he parodies evolution nay-sayers as religious and ignorant people who use the ambiguity of the term theory as a reason to deny evolution.

- (21) "...**ahhh do declare** we donts need no educations and no sciences. we gots witchdoctors so we dont needs real doctors and no evolutions

evolutions is the DAAAAAAAYVIL ah say, tha devil!!!!..."

- (22) "...the most ignorant simply say "SEEE!!! they called it a theory!!"..."

As an atheist, *justcase* offers contempt toward religious organizations in general and towards Christian fundamentalism in particular. In contrast with general societal norms of religion as a virtue, *justcase* demonstrates a strongly negative stance, in keeping with his strong identification as an atheist.

- (23) "...Bible thumping **fundies** are a scourge to truth, to knowledge and good society..."

Justcase explicitly labels himself as an atheist, but only offers this indexical label after a rival poster categorizes an 'atheistic worldview' to which he reacts with a claim of atheism. He claimed a strong positional reaction to this, claiming that atheism is a natural state. This naturalization of atheism closely mirrors his and others' attitudes toward homosexuality. In this way, relationality plays a significant role in his identity displayed as an atheist – in that atheism does not offer answers to unanswerable questions and criticizes religion for attempting to do so. This authentication process is the strongest technique through which he claims an atheist identity for himself.

2.7. Identity Display: justcase as Educator

Justcase displays a measure of comfort in a temporary role of teacher in this forum. As Bucholtz and Hall point out, temporary roles are as salient as permanent ones in establishing identity. Reacting to questions that are dogmatic, he frequently and patiently explains difficult concepts. Example is from one of his earliest posts and he is markedly more polite than his later, seemingly frustrated, responses. Culturally, he positions himself as aligned with society's positive views on education. Coupled with his stance as a citizen concerned about the future of society if children are not educated according to his views on science education, he allows himself to occupy an elevated position in this temporary role

as teacher, urging his ‘pupils’ to do further research.

- (24) “...Actually a lot of people have plausible theories on what is the origin of gravity, time and mass, even if it’s not 100% tight yet. It’s getting there. **Look up some things** like quantum gravity and the higgs boson, and of course, there is string-theory, and **also please look up** something called E8...”

Justcase demonstrates his knowledge of evolution with multiple examples, as well as accusing the author of a rival post of not listening to the truth or checking up on facts as he quotes the original poster and what he perceives as their mistakes. In doing so, he displays the identity of an annoyed schoolteacher, who has to re-explain concepts to a lazy pupil. His responses often evoke a negative stance, much like a red penciled “X” on a pupil’s paper:

- (25) “...*Only a truly uneducated person would say such a thing. It’s 100% wrong...*”

However, he seems frequently to delve into very obscure material and jargon that is inaccessible to one without the appropriate background, again invoking his authority as a scientist. While he occasionally projects an identity of a patient teacher, he also often gives the impression as if people are wasting his time by asking him to explain scientific concepts.

- (26) “...NO, you are **suppose to look it up**, NOT get a full explanation HERE...”

The reality is that his fellow posters are NOT asking him to explain scientific concepts – he takes on the pedagogical role without provocation. Rarely does he acknowledge that his own knowledge is also incomplete. He displays confident arrogance in providing answers to questions and yet he does exhibit a clear degree of knowledge about scientific topics. When he does acknowledge that he is not in complete mastery of the answer, he invokes his science degree as ‘not in biology’ as an explanation.

In this analysis, I have chosen to label this aspect of his identity in the conversation as “teacher” in some respects, more akin to the strict, often vicious schoolmaster character of ‘Snape’ in the Harry Potter book series (Rowling 1997), than to the general cultural understanding of a pedagogue as a nurturing, helpful person. While this is not a label he has assigned himself, I felt it appropriate to characterize his comments in this way, given the function of a large number of his comments that can be categorized as pedantic and even patronizing from a pedagogical standpoint. His temporary role as teacher allows him to access an elevated status within the discourse. He rarely acknowledges that he does not

know something – and frequently offers his statements as right in opposition to others who are plainly (to him) wrong. Indexing his evaluative stance on what the ‘truth’ is, as well as relationality techniques such as authentication and authorization seem most important in *justcase*’s construction of ‘teacher’ identity.

3. Discussion

Within the sociocultural linguistic tradition, identity is co-constructed and negotiated through interaction and is therefore not simply a fixed psychological or mental object, but is flexible, pervasive (Bucholtz/Hall 2005) and in a constant state of change. Identity, then, is less about who one thinks one really to be and more about how social actors accomplish and manage their identities through language.

The preceding data analysis illustrates how language in context is used as a means to construct an identity cluster for one individual. In his interactions with other posters, *justcase* displays an identity cluster of male, scientist and atheist. In doing so, he accesses elevated moral (gay rights supporter, honest) and societal (teacher, scientist, citizen concerned about the future) positions. In his temporary role as teacher, for instance, the cross-response to his interlocutors evokes a schoolmaster persona. He evokes the image of a stereotypical schoolmaster belittling students for their misconceptions. When he does answer with more than a simple word or phrase, he takes time to personally insult the poster by implying that only someone who is either would ask such a question. In this way, *justcase*’s temporary position as teacher serves to reinforce another aspect of his identity cluster, that of an extremely anti-religious person.

Indirect indexicality plays an important role in analysing the identity clusters developed by *justcase*. He reacts to the ideologies surrounding opposition to evolution in science education by strongly asserting an atheistic stance, hence addressing the inherent religiousness of the opposition. He repeatedly indexes the notion of religious people as either stupid or misled, and reacts to this ideology with extreme ridicule. Religious people are vilified repeatedly by *justcase* in these data. In 44 separate comments, he directly and negatively refers to faith, worship, God, the Bible, or religion, while espousing an atheist stance. In this volume of comments, his identity of atheist or of an anti-religious person is strongly indexed by a negative attitude toward organized religion. Other less explicit references to faith and religion exploit the notion of intertextuality in drawing on presumed community knowledge to further index the identity as atheist.

These multiple identities make up a partial identity profile or cluster, constructed solely by using textual information. In this forum, the only aspect of *justcase*’s identity that is made visible to us is his words. The content of those

words create salient aspects of identity for the reader. Whereas a face-to-face interaction might have illuminated these aspects of his identity cluster, the cluster would have been expressed differently. Online cues like lexical choice, indexicality and positionality require some background knowledge of our community, as does most communication either online or offline. A focus on the text allows for a deeper exploration of the intersubjective relations that are informing identity creation than does taking into consideration other identity cues like appearance, for example, might. No less salient than face-to-face interactions in allowing for identity construction, an online presence is constructed differently, exploiting the tools available in the medium.

Identities are co-constructed. That is to say, *justcase's* postings, nearly all of them in response to other individuals, served to create and co-create identities for both the self and the other. Identity studies, as focused on the way we explore, create and establish identity are positioned at the crossroads of language, society and culture. Here, in this online commenting forum, identity is built layer by layer through instances of interaction with other posters. Identities emerge through linguistic devices alone – without the additional semiotic clues such as gesture and prosody that are evident in face-to-face interaction and, unlike live internet chatting, there is more potential for reflection on how to project the identity you wish to be evident.

Justcase uses a number of techniques to construct his identities in partnership with his interlocutors. He offers only a few explicit labels (scientist, atheist), but instead relies more on indexical classifications like his evaluative stance on honesty, for example, to display his particular identities. *Justcase's* habit of quoting the comments to which he is replying help to establish his identity as separate from most of his rival interlocutors. The partialness principle is evident in linguistic structures, mostly lexical choices, representing ideologies of belief and disbelief.

This short case study shows that identity is a complex phenomenon that can be explored, negotiated and co-constructed through textual items alone. Through discussion of multiple conflicts (parental rights, religious rights, educational content, the theory of evolution), *justcase* and his interlocutors display multiple aspects of their respective identities. Growing from a law intended to give parents the right to remove their children from classroom discussions about sensitive topics (sexuality and religion), this comment thread went far beyond the proposed law. It triggered a series of fairly explosive arguments regarding the validity of science and religion, and particularly the interaction between them, with respect to the theory of evolution.

In the absence of any biographical details about the individual author '*justcase*', we can understand that he is displaying an identity cluster of a heterosexual male who is probably not a parent. Concurrently, he is performing the identity

of a scientist, deeply concerned with his notions of truth and honesty as well as an atheist with very strong anti-religious feelings and little tolerance for others' belief systems.

We cannot see what *justcase* looks like, what his voice sounds like or what his socioeconomic status indicates, yet we are able to determine, through textual cues alone, what elements of a specific identity cluster he is performing through interaction with fellow posters on an online discussion board. While this may or may not reflect the real-life situation of *justcase* on a personal level, we can understand aspects of identity based on the written word alone.

Bibliography

- Antaki, C., Ardévol, E., Núñez, F., & Vayreda, A. (2005). "For she who knows who she is:" Managing Accountability in Online Forum Messages. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(1), 114-132.
- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bakhtin, M./ Holquist, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Baym, N. K. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Community and Technology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Blood, R. (2000). *weblogs: a history and perspective*. Retrieved from http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2004a). Theorizing identity in language and sexuality research. *Language in Society*, 33(04), 469-515.
- Bucholtz, M./ Hall, K. (2004b). Language and identity. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (pp. 389-394). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bucholtz, M./ Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse studies*, 585-614.
- Bucholtz, M./ Hall, K. (2008a). Finding identity: Theory and data. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 27(1-2), 151-163.
- Bucholtz, M./Hall, K. (2008b). All of the above: New coalitions in sociocultural linguistics I. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 401-431.
- Canadian Broadcasting Company. (2009). CBC News - Calgary - Evolution classes optional under proposed law. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/story/2009/04/30/cgy-bill-evolution-law-alberta-classes-teachers.html>
- Canadian Broadcasting Company. (2012). CBC.ca - Submissions. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/aboutcbc/discover/submissions.html>
- Cherny, L. (1999). *Conversation and community: Chat in a virtual world*.
- CIRA. (2013). *Canadian Internet Registration Authority - FACTBOOK 2013 | Canada Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.cira.ca/factbook/2013/canada-online.html>
- Eckert, P./ McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). Think practically and look locally: language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11, 461-490.
- Eckert, P./ McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Gender and language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Hymes, D. (1962). The ethnography of speaking. *Anthropology and human behavior*, 13(53), 11-74.
- Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for applied linguistics.
- Milne, G. R./ Rohm, A. J./ Bahl, S. (2004). Consumer's protection of online privacy and identity. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38(2), 217-232.
- National Center for Science Education. (2008). *Kitzmiller v. Dover: Intelligent Design on Trial | NCSE*. Retrieved from <http://ncse.com/creationism/legal/intelligent-design-trial-kitzmiller-v-dover>
- Ochs, E. (1992). Indexing Gender. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
- Sacks, H./ Schlegoff, E. A./ Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 696-735.
- Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23(3), 193-229.
- Subrahmanyam, K./ Greenfield, P. M./ Tynes, B. (2004). Constructing sexuality and identity in an online teen chat room. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 651-666.
- The Ottawa Citizen. (2006). Professor denied federal research funds for assuming evolution to be scientific fact. Retrieved from <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=fc342c6a-46b2-440d-ba22-7538fe21d275>
- White, P. R. R. (2003). Beyond modality and hedging: A dialogic view of the language of intersubjective stance. *Text*, 23 (2), 259-284.

Acknowledgements:

This paper is adapted from a paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, awarded in 2010 by the University of Western Ontario, under the direction of Dr. Tania Granadillo. Special thanks to Dr. Granadillo for her support and direction and for that of the author's current PhD supervisor, Dr. Magda Stroinska of McMaster University.

Sheryl Sawyer, MA
PhD Candidate, Cognitive Science of Language
McMaster University
Department of Linguistics and Languages
Togo Salmon Hall 629
1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4M2
Email: sawyersa@mcmaster.ca