Jan Kochanowski University Press

This is a contribution from *Token*: *A Journal of English Linguistics*
Volume 12/2021.
Edited by John G. Newman, Marina Dossena and Sylwester Łodej.
Special Editor for volume 12: Christina Samson.

Introduction[1]

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1. Discursive identities in historical English texts

This special issue of *Token: A Journal of English Linguistics* contains a collection of papers originating from the International Conference on *Discursive Identities in Historical English Texts* organised by Prof. Christina Samson, coordinator of the Corpora and Historical English Research (CHER) group, within the Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology at the University of Florence. The conference was the first public engagement activity of CHER, held in October 2019, and it drew together researchers tackling diachronic discursive identity from multiple perspectives. Most of the contributions included in this special issue were presented and discussed at the event, whereas others were inspired by the topic and offer a wider angle on it.

All the papers analyse discursive identity in historical English corpora, many of which have been especially compiled for the purpose, as a result of the increasing number of historical digitised material available and easily accessible online. Corpora, on the one hand, are contributing to an increase in corpus linguistics studies from a diachronic perspective; on the other hand, they enable the expansion of the (currently limited) research on the notion of identity and its relationship with language use from a historical perspective.

Identity has long been considered a slippery and confusing concept, gathering together a wide range of concerns, tropes, curiosities, patterns

[1] Although the authors worked closely on the preparation of this Introduction, Christina Samson is responsible for Sections 1 and 3, whereas Birte Bös is responsible for Section 2.

DOI: 10.25951/4841

of thoughts, debates around certain binaries and particular kinds of conversations (Wetherell 2010: 3). However, in recent years, there has been an increasing consensus that regards identity as something created and performed rather than innate and possessed, as Joseph (2009) claims. Benwell – Stokoe (2009) argue that language and interaction are the focus of identity, which recalls Hegel ([1807] 1977), according to whom identity is a response to the activities of others. Human selves and their identities are not substances cemented prior to the establishment of people's relationships with one another, but are constituted as properties only in and through the forms of human subjectivity that arise from and inform that participation and those relationships (Williams 2000: 21). From this perspective, identity is seen not only as a complex and many-sided phenomenon, but also an entity constructed through interaction and dependant on time and space (Butcholz – Hall 2005; De Fina et al. 2006; Auer 2007), wherein language is crucial, as it allows speakers to express their world view in an interactive process.

Consequently, drawing on Bucholtz – Hall (2005: 585), identity is understood as a product rather than a source of linguistic and other semiotic practices, and therefore it is a social and cultural rather than primarily an internal psychological phenomenon. It includes macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances, participant roles, and local, ethnographically emergent cultural positions. It may be linguistically indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems. Moreover, overlapping aspects of the relationship between self and other, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice and authority/delegitimacy can be found in identity. The latter, can, therefore, be partially considered an outcome of interactional negotiation, a construct of others' perceptions and representations and of larger ideological processes and structures.

Within this approach, personal identity refers not only to individual characters or attitudes towards others, but also to self-consciousness, which never exists in isolation but in relation to 'others' who serve to validate its existence (Hall 2004). Therefore, the self is defined primarily by virtue of its membership in, or identification with, a particular group or groups (Benwell – Stokoe 2009). This leads to a collective or social view of identity.

Social identity is indeed related to the groups one belongs to or does not belong to, or identifies with, though, according to Kluge (2019), identity derives from the fusion of social identity and personality in contextual and interactive discourse, thus contributing to a complex entity. Social identity

implies both "the perception of features shared with fellows in the in-group and the perceived differences with other groups" (Grad – Martin 2008: 12) and it is linked to the majority culture that, according to Wodak (2011: 61), is seen as the norm, the 'us', and the minority group, which is viewed as the 'other'. Consequently, who we are varies according to the prevailing power relations of ideologies which impact on our perspectives.

Feeling part of a community is also related to the concept of national identity. For Hall (1996) it is a discursive construct which originates from a system of cultural representations that allows people to interpret and feel part of a nation intended as an "imagined community". This sense of in-group membership derives both from a shared culture and a common history – the latter defined as "collective memory" – which consists in a selective recollection of past events that are important for a specific community of people (Halbwachs 1985). The notion of collective memory is crucial to an analysis of the discursive construction of a nation, as it shows what aspects, events and social actors are selected from the archive of historical memory to identify a common origin and create continuity between past and present. However, Wodak et al. (2009) view national identities also as mental structures which influence – and are in turn influenced by – social practices and find their actualization in discourse. The notion of national identity is considered a sort of habitus: that is, a complex of common ideas, concepts or perception schemas of related emotional attitudes, of similar behavioural dispositions which are internalized through national socialisation (De Cillia et al. 1999: 153).

The representation of the 'other', though, is also linked to reference, that is, the selection of an object or an individual one wishes to say something about (Carlson 2004); this is what happens, for instance, in descriptions wherein some features rather than others are selected as emblematic of social group membership or self-reference. Self-reference is also connected to a writer's identity construction, as in the use of personal pronouns or indexical constructions that express social identification to foster in-group behaviour which reflects socio-cultural conventions as well as personal characteristics (Nevala – Lutzsky 2019). Terms of reference, therefore, convey information about the writer, the addressee, their positions in society, and their attitudes and evaluations by the use of discourse. In sum, there are myriad ways that identity can be conveyed, from habitual practice to interactional negotiation and ideologies which unfold in discourses such as those which historical linguists find preserved in written texts of the past.

2. Contexts and data

Research on processes of identity construction of the past poses particular challenges. Going beyond the basic assumption that people have always drawn on a repertoire of linguistic (and other semiotic) resources in the discursive construction of identities, it is essential to avoid relying merely on our modern socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic competences and models of present-day societies. For this purpose, a broad range of contextual aspects need to be considered.

Just like identity, context is a complex construct which has been conceptualised in many different ways (Flowerdew 2016) and which, in the wake of the discursive turn, came to be "understood in a new way as a dynamic and multi-layered notion" (Taavitsainen – Jucker 2015: 6). Its basis is formed by the text, which is considered as the locus of linguistic forms which can be constructed as indexical of particular identities. These forms are surrounded by cotext, infratextual and intertextual context whose consideration further contributes to a flexible conceptualisation of context (Taavitsainen – Jucker 2015: 6).

Moving beyond the text-focussed dimensions, situational and macrosocial contexts can be subsumed under the term 'extratextual context'. The "widening scope of context" particularly associated with sociocultural turns (Taavitsainen – Jucker 2015: 6) comprises the broader macrosocial contexts wherein context shapes and is shaped by discourse (Reisigl 2017). In addition, with the cognitive lens of the modern researcher not only the influence of the researcher's personal experiences in the reconstruction of historical identities, but also the importance of academic positioning needs to be considered.

The importance of accounting for changes in the conceptualisations of core notions in identity research, like the concept of 'self', is shown by Culpeper – Demmen (2011). They point out that the notion of an 'inner self' started to develop only in the Early Modern period. Various sociocultural developments, like the rise of Protestantism, and increasing social and geographical mobility and urbanisation, which changed the structure of social networks and weakened local community ties, fuelled the shift from community to individual. It is therefore vital to simultaneously consider the different levels of context and contemporary ideologies, taking into account historical discourse communities and their perspectives.

For obvious reasons historical texts are scarce, particularly for the earliest stages of English, whereas from the Late Middle English period

onwards increasingly varied data have been preserved (Jucker 2011: 185). However, the overall situation for researchers has improved tremendously in recent years, as historical documents have been digitized and made accessible to broad audiences in digital archives and historical corpora.

Small corpora, which are often compiled for specific purposes and are contextually well-anchored, enable careful 'horizontal reading' and manual processing (Taavitsainen 2018). This is an important advantage, as it is not easy to operationalise linguistic processes of identity construction, and many indexical elements can be hard to detect and extract automatically. Indeed, close reading also provides a chance to reveal less obvious features of identity construction (Hiltunen – Loureiro-Porto 2020: 4). Yet, the range and frequency of relevant features contained in small-sized corpora may be severely limited. Large corpora, on the other hand, may contain indexical features in higher frequencies, a broader range of genres, etc. However, the results of automated searches are usually presented in isolation, and it is not always possible to recontextualise them to a degree that is sufficient for identity research, especially in the case of those corpora which provide access to only a limited amount of cotext and lack detailed information regarding other contextual aspects.

No doubt, merely quantitative approaches do not suffice for research on discursive identities. However, combinations of qualitative and quantitative approaches prove fruitful, as the growth of fields such as historical corpus pragmatics and corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) in the past decades confirms. Such combinations allow for bottom-up methods, relying on elements extracted inductively from the data, e.g. in close reading, and top-down processes, using corpus-linguistic methods to investigate features previously identified, e.g. in prior linguistic or sociohistorical studies (Partington et al. 2013: 12; Taavitsainen 2018: 534).

3. The studies in this issue

In the first contribution of this special issue, Del Lungo Camiciotti focuses on religious identity, and examines the construction of women's Quaker identity in ego-documents which were a privileged locus of male self-expression in the 17th century and afterwards. More specifically, the study investigates Margaret Fell's writings that contributed to the establishment of the Quakers' group identity by elaborating forms of self-representation both similar to that of men, as members of the Society of Friends, and as women

assuming typically feminine roles. Although identity is primarily the locus of self and subjectivity, when referring to religious identity it addresses also social and political aspects. In this perspective, Del Lungo Camiciotti traces an identity which is masculine at a collective community level and feminine at an individual religious level, with a vision of separateness from the others, although the intent in Margaret Fell's writings was to prove the importance of the female world for the religious community, as indicated in the Scripture itself.

Samson's contribution analyses the construal of discursive social identities in a corpus of Victorian women's travel writings in colonial India. Through a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of key words and their key clusters, Samson highlights the most frequent linguistic patterns characterising representations of cultural and social contexts as well as how diversity is encoded in discourses construing the authors' and other identities. In particular, the constant awareness of England's role in India and of the writers' social identity emerging from the repeated need to differentiate and demarcate themselves from the other in discourse is brought to the fore. Although the writings support the rule of one collectivity over another, they foreground how identities cannot be considered immutable but might be seen as characterised by fluidity.

Shvanyukova examines a corpus of nineteenth-century advice manuals for women that ideologically and discursively constructed a model of socially acceptable female identity. The analysis foregrounds how the dominant conduct discourse disseminated ideas about how women were expected to appear and behave if they were to be treated as respectable members of society and eligible for marriage. Shvanyukova underlines how norms and codes of behaviour in advice manuals were explicitly presented as gendered, with women's position in society and personal identity represented as completely different from, if complementary and subordinate to, those of men in all spheres of life. Nevertheless, the manuals hint at changes in the social position of women, which generated anxieties in the society of the time, but which also resonate today.

The next two papers study national identity in different contexts. Cecconi investigates how British colonists of North America frame their national identity in the socio-political and judicial debates in a corpus of newspaper articles before and after the Declaration of Independence. In her corpus-assisted discourse study, Cecconi focuses on the most frequently used descriptors and their collocational and colligational patterns through which discursive national identities are not only encoded, but also show

how an independent (proto) national identity starts to emerge through discursive strategies of assimilation, perpetuation and dismantling.

Martini examines the denial of identity in a corpus of letters to the Editor of *The Times* published during the period 1914-1926 which mention the Armenian genocide, which is considered the first of its kind in the 20th century. That denial not only opposed international political pressure, but also contested much evidence provided in the press. By using a corpus-assisted approach, Martini analyses the linguistic patterns used to represent the Armenian question at the time. The concordance lines, collocations, clusters and extended co-textual references of keywords and their patterns influence the perception of the Armenian identity, which appears ambivalent in its representation, when not reduced to one of the socio-political instances involved in the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. This contributes to weakening the perception of the population's identity.

The identity of the English language is instead the focus of Facchinetti's study on the role the British lexico-grammatical tradition has had in shaping it through the centuries. By analysing, as case studies, the works of two scholars who contributed to the advancement of English in their own original way (the 16th-century lexicographer Peter Levins, who authored the first English-Latin rhyming dictionary, and the 19th-century grammarian Percival Leigh, who published two comic grammars, one for Latin and one for English), Facchinetti traces the progressive change in the power relationship between English and Latin.

Dossena takes a historical sociolinguistic approach to a small corpus of mostly mid-twentieth-century lyrics in Western movies and TV series to study what linguistic mechanisms are at work for the construction and reinforcement of group identities. These pertain both to the protagonists of the films themselves and to their viewers, whose empathy and emotive participation in the fictional events is elicited. Dossena suggests the lyrics have multiple functions, such as supplementing dialogue, telling stories through ballads, and referring to often stereotypical mental images in their recurring traits, and that their pragmatic success derives from their memorability and from the associations they evoke with an idealized past.

Vezzosi, drawing from descriptive and theoretical linguistics, adopts a text-centred approach in analysing Dickinson's use of personal and intensive pronouns. These are considered by the poet as structures which exist within a male-controlled realm and which require contrast with an unpredictable and indeterminate usage. This appears to conform to its norms, but in reality it endows the standard pattern with unexpected

functions and meanings. Vezzosi foregrounds how changes in gender pronouns (from female to neuter and male) become a powerful instrument to construct Dickinson's identity as a woman poet in a male-hierarchically structured society wherein her poetic creation is publicly recognised and socially accepted.

The volume closes with Ditifeci – Kantzas taking into consideration the effects of digital communication on language. The authors analyse the diachronic development of English through the textual comparison of English translations of the Bible, in order to verify the latter's discursive identity. For this purpose, several linguistic parameters are considered through statistical comparison and manual counting to assess initial research hypotheses referring to grammatical and syntactic features. Ditifeci – Kantzas underline that the results confirm their hypotheses in the diachronic axis 1611-1992, especially in relation to linguistic simplification. This indicates the occurrence of a deep linguistic identity modification over time, which contributes to our understanding of the manifold ways and contexts in which identity is construed and conveyed.

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