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Social Identification and Positioning in Academic Discourse: An English-Polish Comparative Study

Abstract

This article sets out to present the critical role of positioning theory and social identification theory in the discoursal analysis of authorial presence in academic texts by focusing on the dynamic nature of writer identity. Drawing on Harré's, Fairclough's and Hall's work, and my own focus on the relationship between students' identities and their experience of academic writing, I claim that discoursal identity often establishes itself in relation to difference and that it refers to the various "selves" which writers employ in the act of writing, which locates identity in socio-cultural and institutionally defined subject positions. An empirical case is then presented. It consists of a description of my own semi-ethnographic study[1] on the co-construction of *authorial identity* in student writing in both English and Polish, focusing on the findings of the macro-level analysis of a text corpus. The findings of the study support my other claim that *authorial identity* is a dynamic concept which cannot be determined entirely by socio-cultural or institutional factors, but is unique for each writer and can be negotiated and changed.

Keywords: academic discourse, authorial identity, social identification, deliberate self-positioning, forced self-positioning.

Theoretical background

"Discourse" is a difficult concept, mainly because of the wide variety of conflicting definitions that have been formulated from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. The multiplicity of discourse functions is accentuated in Gee's (2012: 3) definition that: "Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting,

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[1] This paper is based on a part of my Ph.D. research project on "The co-construction of authorial identity in student writing in Polish and English."

valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing […]. They are 'ways of being in the world.' They are 'forms of life.' They are socially situated identities." Gee also asserts that "[f]ailing to display an identity fully is tantamount to announcing you do not have that identity – at best you are pretender or a beginner" (1990: 155). Such a multidimensional view of discourse does not allow text analyses in linguistics to focus exclusively on sentence-level research (as Fisiak's research in the 1980s did), or on the investigation of textual organization patterns (which was the subject of Duszak's 1994, 1997 and Golebiowski's 1998, 2006 studies). Today, discourse analyses extend their scope to higher-level organizational features which emphasize interaction between discourse participants situated in a particular socio-cultural and institutional context. This approach has been made possible due to Halliday's and Fairclough's methods for discourse analysis which view language as an analytical tool in a "social-semiotic perspective." Fairclough (1992: 64) argues that discourse contributes predominantly to what are referred to as "social identities" and "subject positions" for social "subjects" and types of "self." *Subject positions*, which in the original sense of the term correspond to the interactants' dynamic and discourse-situated actions, thus underlining the participants' *agency*, seem to be a more attractive alternative for a linguistically-oriented socio-cultural analyst than the static and high-order concept of "role" as proposed by Goffman in the late 1950s. The plural form of this noun brings to mind the theories of Harré, Davis, van Langenhove or Bakhtin, who emphasized the variety of possibilities for the realization of the discoursal *self* and now allow us to avoid the trap of single positioning. Academic authors usually move between different subject positions, some of which are more important than others, some of which they identify themselves with and some of which they reject. The plural word "positionings" also captures the idea of people interacting simultaneously with a variety of social groups. It means that there is no identity as a product but a continuous self-identification process which lasts throughout one's lifetime and equips each individual with several identities. In identifying myself as a woman, for example, I identify myself with the broader category of "women," or at least with some aspects of that category. I also identify myself as a native speaker of Polish, a mother, an academic teacher, a writer and a jazz lover. I have to manage all of my identities because they impact each other rather than simply add up to one another, so the way I enact my identity as, for example, an academic teacher, is influenced by my other identities.

Burke (1969) was the first rhetorical theorist to claim that *identification* is the key term in *rhetoric* (referring both to spoken and written discourse) and argued that *rhetoric* as such cannot be viewed solely as the act of explicit and intentional persuasion addressed to a specific audience because, first of all, it requires *identification*. According to Burke, the primary aim of rhetoric is not to win an argument but to establish a relationship between the interactants. He argued, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (Burke 1969: 55).

Burke's *identification theory* is in line with the conventional meaning of *identification,* which is understood as a notion constituted on the basis of shared origin, properties or characteristics with another individual or group. In contrast to this common sense definition, a more recent approach accentuates the critical role of *difference* in the act of discursive identity construction. Along these lines, Stuart Hall argues**:**

> [t]he discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed […] subject to the 'play', of différence. It obeys the logic of more-than-one. And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the blinding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects'. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process. (1996: 2–3)

The problem of conflicting identities is often the case of academic writers who do not define themselves in terms of areas of similarity shared with other group members. Connolly (1991), when exploring the nature of political identity, argued that identity only establishes itself in relation to difference, *i.e.* in order to initiate the process of identity formation it is necessary for there to be other identities – other relationships which are being rejected. Similarity, difference and boundaries between an individual writer and social groups play a critical role in the act of authorial identity construction. As Ivanič (1998) observes, the problem of identification with one particular academic community is reflected in the process of writing an academic essay when students, on the one hand, have a sense of belonging to their academic community but, on the other hand, identify themselves strongly with other groups, from whom their academic community may be differentiating itself. In my teaching practice I have often witnessed situations when student-writers decided not to express some important aspects of their identity constituted by their cultural experience for fear of not being understood by the audience (a teacher or their classmates).

The boundary that might help to establish academic writer identity does not, however, seem possible to be set because of the wide variety of positionings that constitute the individual's self. This is well explained by Harré's and van Langenhove's *positioning theory*, which can be viewed as a conceptual and methodological framework classifying acts of positioning into three main categories:

> [O]n one dimension of difference what matters is whether individual persons are positioned by individuals or collectives by collectives. On another dimension what matters is whether an individual or collective reflectively positions themselves, or whether it is by some other which positions and is positioned. The third dimension is whether the positioning act is symmetrical or asymmetrical, that is, whether each positions the other or whether in positioning one the other is also positioned in the same act. (1999: 6)

Since an individual's identity is a complex of interweaving positionings embedded in a lifelong self-identification process, both positioning theory and identification theory should not be treated as deterministic theories that call for immediate application but rather as a starting point for reflecting on many different aspects involved in the construction of academic writer identity.

The study

The critical impact of social identification and positioning on writer identity became evident during an analysis of the text and the interview corpora of my own research project on the co-construction of authorial identity in student writing in both Polish and English.

My study was conducted at two universities in Warsaw and at one university in Łódź, Poland. The subjects participating in the study were Polish students in their fourth year of full-time English Philology[2] studies (the first year of their master's studies) and Polish students in their first year of full-time Polish Philology[3] studies at the master's level. The sample size consisted of 16 student participants and was

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2   *English Philology* is a common university department in Poland which combines the study of practical language learning, linguistics, literature and culture of English-speaking countries.

3   *Polish Philology* is a common university department in Poland which combines the study of literature and linguistics with other disciplines relevant to both literature and linguistics.

divided into two groups: a research group and a control group. The subject of my research inquiry was the authorial identity of English Philology students which was compared with the textual realization of the identity of Polish Philology subjects.

My control group subjects had basic knowledge of English and no experience with writing in this language, whereas my research subjects were at either the second (intercultural) or third (transcultural) level of intercultural learning (according to Meyer's and Kordes' classification) and, therefore, were aware of how to navigate the linguistic and cultural divide. They had been required to write in English as a part of their curriculum for three years prior to this study. Just as other second language writers in English, they were expected to align themselves both with the language behavior of native speakers and with the conventions of their academic discourse community.

My study was modeled on research methods from the ethnographic inquiry used by Geertz (1973) and Ivanič (1998), and from the discourse analysis that had been conducted by van Leeuwen (2008). Believing, along with Geertz (1973: 5), that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," I took culture to be those webs and not an exercise in experimental science in search of a law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

To test the validity of the research assumptions, writing samples and interviews with the students were selected for the case-study research. The study used an interpretative, contextualized and qualitative approach to data analysis and included a small sample of quantitative observations.

The following research question was the main subject of inquiry of this research project:

- Does a dual authorial "self" exist? If it does, how is it developed and expressed in student writing in English and Polish?

First, the "thick description" as proposed by Geertz was used here to describe the students' written work in order to find out what kind of themes would emerge during the analysis of the writing samples. Then, narrative interviews were conducted (Chamberlyne *et al.* 2000) to obtain narrative accounts of the subjects' lives for the corpus. The students' responses to my questionnaire-based questions were examined for indicators of recurring themes both in the interviews and in the writing samples. Later, the recurring themes were typified, categorized and coded. My questions were subject to modification and alteration as the study progressed. Then, four aspects of "self" as outlined by Ivanič (1998), *i.e.* "autobiographical self," "discoursal self," "self as author" and **possibilities for selfhood in a socio-cultural and institutional context**," were applied to provide a framework to investigate the role of identity in student writing in both Polish and English.

The study drew on a three-dimensional framework for studying discourse as first developed by Fairclough and applied in critical discourse analysis (CDA). Since the responses to the questions posed at the meso level of analysis were known, the study concentrated on the two other aspects of CDA, *i.e.* on the macro and micro levels.

The concept of social actors investigated at the macro level in my study was inspired by the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), which offers a very useful framework for a metalinguistic understanding of social actor representation. Their functional "grammar of visual design" acknowledges that all texts have social, cultural and contextual aspects that must be considered along with consideration of the intended audience and purpose.

To examine the role of social actors as depicted in the writing samples of my study subjects, I posed the following research questions:

- What relevant identities do authors communicate in their texts?
- Why are these identities conceptualized and communicated the way they are?

To answer these questions, I considered the following two parameters of social actor representation:

- the number and types of social actors in discourse;
- the frequency of a change in perspective.

In response to the writing task, the study subjects were asked to draw on their personal experience with writing and to express their opinions about the relationship between their situation as student-writers and the metaphor of Scheherazade's plight. The research group students were required to produce two essays, one written in English and one written in Polish, whereas the control group students were to write one essay in Polish. All of the subjects were also asked to address the following question: "How does Hawthorne's saying 'Easy reading is damn hard writing' relate to Scheherazade's talent and to your personal experience as a student writer?"

The basic interpretation of Scheherazade's metaphor assumes a direct comparison of the situation of the "I-student-writer" to Scheherazade's plight. However, the identities communicated by the actors in the subjects' essays from both groups varied in type and number. The number of social actors in the texts written by the research group subjects ranged from 6 to 10, and in the texts written by the control group subjects it ranged from 3 to 12. The identities communicated by my study subjects also differed in the sequence of a change in perspective. However, the disparities in both the number and status of the social actors were observed not between groups but within the groups.

This finding can be explained by the fact that each academic writer is equipped with several identities and that writer has to decide how to enact his or her identities in a particular text. In the narratives of my study subjects, their authorial identities "travel" through different stages according to each writer's individual choice (they move from general, expressed by the pronouns "we" or "they," to specific identities, expressed by the pronouns "I" or "s/he," or the narrative voice of the "I-writer" is hidden behind other perspectives, thus effacing the writer's *self* completely). This observation shows that academic writers may see themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, as authors and, consequently, thus present themselves to a greater or lesser extent as authors. Some writers express their ideas by activating the voices of other social actors represented in the test, whereas others take up a strong authorial stance by the more frequent use of the "I-writer" perspective.

The diversified data presented above support my claim that writing is an act of identity which reveals the author's natural habit or characteristic in order for that writer to present him or herself or others as authoritative and to develop a widespread or more concise interpretative approach. Therefore, the ability to reflect, or to look at ideas from several points of view, is the individual predisposition of each writer, and not a skill to be mastered from observation and practice.

The dynamic view of identity I am presenting here also stresses the tensions that occur when student-writers are expected to align themselves with the rhetorical conventions of the institution in which they write and to meet the expectations of individual teachers.

My analysis of the text and the interview corpora for the power relations that exist between readers and writers yields the following observations:

- both groups of students expressed power relations through the following perspectives: listeners → storytellers; Scheherazade → the king; writers → readers; student-writers → teachers;
- both groups of students used modal verbs of external constraint to signal power relations (*e.g.* must, have to, should, ought to).

These data clearly show that power relations are a central part of the writing process for both groups of students under investigation since they refer to fixed, pre-discursive subject positions that are assigned to readers (teachers) and writers (students). In this way, power relations contribute to the creation of the "institutional" part of the student-writers' identity since students are expected to obey the conventionalized values and beliefs of academic communication and the institutionally established rules for the rhetorical structure of the written work.

Conclusions

To sum up, the above-mentioned findings show that the construction of *authorial identity* is a dynamic concept which cannot be determined entirely by any socio-cultural or institutional factors but is rather the outcome of complex social identification processes and the different positions that writers occupy in discourse. Some of these occur in the form of *deliberate self-positioning* (according to Harré's classification), which happens when one wants to express his/her personal identity and decides to do so by stressing one's agency, by referring to one's unique point of view, or by referring to events in one's biography. The other type of positioning, referred to by Harré as *forced self-positioning*, shifts the initiative from the person involved ("the author" in academic discourse) to somebody else ("the external socio-cultural and institutional forces" in an academic text). Since the resources for the construction of identity are multiple, the academic writer's identity remains a complex of interweaving and dynamic positionings.

My research project has only been an issue-raising study revealing the complexity of the factors involved in the discoursal construction of writer identity in academic texts written in the subjects' mother tongue and a foreign language. It is therefore clear that there are many avenues for future research within this new field of discourse studies of identity, with particular reference to the context of academic writing. An important line of further study can be inspired by the following questions which emerged from this study:

- To what extent is authorial identity constructed by the *agency* of the writers, their deliberate self-positioning, and to what extent is it a product of forced subject positions that writers occupy in a particular socio-cultural and institutional context?
- Which subject positions do writers identify with, which do they feel ambivalent about and which do they reject?
- What is the role of power as a force which mediates academic discourse?
- What major and minor identities are communicated in an academic text?
- What are the factors that determine the strength of authorial stance in an academic text?

Since the problem of the mechanisms of discourse identity construction is by no means resolved and requires further interdisciplinary research, answers to the above questions should contribute to the development of theory and practice in such fields as discourse studies, textual linguistics and cultural studies.

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