# Constructing Social Identity: A Language Socialization Perspective

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The New York Times* (Rimer, 1992) recently printed a journal essay on immigrant parents who react to their children learning English with a sense of pride mingled with a sense of loss. Their sense of loss concerns children's shifting social identities, including shifts in their relationship to their parents as well as transformations of family values that often accompany children's adoption of another language. Rather than children being dependent on parents, parents find themselves dependent on children, who become mediators for their parents as they interact with the local environment. In some families, generational ties are tested as children and parents increasingly struggle to find common ground.

The thrust of *The New York Times* piece is old news to those linguists who for several decades have charted the linguistic and sociocultural journeys of language acquirers, who by choice or necessity

operate in complex multicode and multicultural universes. In this article, I provide a theoretical perspective on this and other circumstances in which language acquisition is closely tied to social identity. For purposes of this discussion, I consider "social identity" as a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life.

Linguistic constructions at all levels of grammar and discourse are crucial indicators of social identity for members as they regularly interact with one another; complementarily, social identity is a crucial dimension of the social meaning of particular linguistic constructions. But no matter how crucial language is for understanding social identity and social identity for understanding the social meaning of language, social identity is rarely grammaticized or otherwise explicitly encoded across the world's languages.[1] In other words, the relation between language and social identity is predominantly a sociolinguistically *distant* one.

In this article, I suggest ways in which researchers of language socialization and language development might understand this distant and complex relation between language and social identity. Specifically, I argue that speakers attempt to establish the social identities of themselves and others through verbally performing certain social *acts* and verbally displaying certain *stances*. In this article, "social act" means any socially recognized, goal-directed behavior, such as making a request, contradicting another person, or interrupting someone (Ochs, 1990). "Stance" means a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989). Stance includes displays of *epistemic* attitudes, such as how certain or uncertain a speaker is about some proposition (Chafe & Nichols, 1986), and displays of *affective* attitudes, such as intensity of emotion or kind of emotion about some referent or proposition (Besnier, 1990; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989).

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## 2. LINGUISTIC RESOURCES FOR CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY

My discussion explores how competent native speakers build identities such as woman, man, mother, father, child, scientist, and for-

eigner by performing particular kinds of acts and displaying particular kinds of epistemic and affective stances. Speakers may use a verbal act or stance in an attempt to construct not only their own identities but the social identities of other interlocutors. Thus, for example, I may attempt to build my identity as a professional academic by performing a range of professional acts, such as hypothesizing, claiming, instructing, and assessing, and displaying stances, such as objectivity, knowledgeability, and intellectual flexibility. On the other hand, *other* people in my environment are also trying to construct my identity. Thus, I may run into someone who, in the course of the same encounter, directs a number of compliments toward me. I may infer, on the basis of recognizing those conventional acts of flattery, that my interlocutor is perhaps attempting to foreground my gender identity as a woman or perhaps trying to forge an intimate social relationship with me or to establish me in an exhalted position and/or make me indebted to him or her for so establishing me in this position.

In all of these cases, the relation of language to social identity is not direct but rather *mediated* by the interlocutors' understandings of conventions for doing particular social acts and stances and the interlocutor's understandings of how acts and stances are resources for structuring particular social identities (Brown & Levinson, 1979; Ochs, 1988, in press). Membership in a social group, whether it be a distinct language community or a distinct social group within a language community, depends on members' knowledge of local conventions for building social identities through act and stance displays. Somewhat like the valences that chemical elements have that bind them together in particular ways to form chemical compounds, particular acts and particular stances have local conventional links that bind them together to form particular social identities. Social identity is a complex social meaning that can be distilled into the act and stance meanings that bring it into being. From this point of view, social identity is not usually explicitly encoded by language but rather is a social meaning that one usually *infers* on the basis of one's sense of the act and stance meanings encoded by linguistic constructions. Of course, although some acts and stances are closely associated with particular social identities, other acts and stances are resources for constructing a wide range of social identities. Hence, some identities are more readily inferrable from acts and stances (e.g., the identity of teacher inferrable from asking a test question in the U.S. or the identity of low-ranking person inferrable

from a stance of attentiveness and accomodation in traditional Samoan communities) than others.

A chemical analogy (i.e., valences) is appealing to characterize cultural conventions for linking acts and stances to social identity. The analogy stops here, however, because social identities are not automatic reactions or stable outcomes of particular act and stance displays. As is discussed in Section 5, acts and stances are related in complex ways to social identities. There is not necessarily a rigid or obligatory mapping of certain acts and stances onto certain identities. Rather members of communities may use different kinds of acts and stances to construct themselves variably within some particular social status or social relationship. Further, whether or not a particular social identity does indeed take hold in a social interaction depends minimally on (a) whether the speaker and other interlocutors share cultural and linguistic conventions for constructing particular acts and stances, (b) whether the speaker and other interlocutors share economic, political, or other social histories and conventions that associate those acts and stances with the particular social identity a speaker is trying to project, and (c) whether other interlocutors are able and willing or are otherwise constrained to ratify the speaker's claim to that identity.

## 3. LEVELS OF COMPETENCE IN CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY

In this sense, assignment of social identity is a complex inferential and social process. And if we want to understand as researchers and acquirers of language and culture why an acquirer's claim to a social identity failed at some particular moment, we need to sort out the level that accounts for the failure.

Did the acquirer produce the verbal action or stance in a conventional manner? For example, did the acquirer compliment, ask a question, make a hypothesis, or display a stance of certainty or intimacy in a conventional manner? If not, the failure may be due to the acquirer's lack of knowledge concerning local conventions for act or stance production. Is the acquirer displaying acts and stances that are consonant with local understandings of particular statuses, relation-

ships, ranks, and group identities? For example, is the way a first or second language acquirer is complimenting, asking a question, formulating a hypothesis, or displaying certainty or intimacy consonant with local understandings and expectations concerning what it is to be a child, a student, a woman, a man, or a foreigner? If not, failure to establish social identity may not be due to the acquirer's lack of understanding of how to perform particular acts and stances linguistically but to a lack of understanding as to how in that particular community those acts and stances are conventionally related to particular social identities.

And, even if all of these understandings are in place, a projected social identity may not take hold if an acquirer does not know the conventions for linguistically *ratifying* a speaker's claim to social identity. An acquirer may not know how to show alignment with a speaker concerning the social identity of one or other interlocutor or some nonpresent referent. These questions need to be probed to discern how human beings construct social identity in social interactions the world over. Such questions also begin to illuminate breakdowns in the communication of social identity in everyday life.

## 4. CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY IN CHILDHOOD

It makes good sense to understand social identity as a social construct that is both inferred and interactionally achieved through displays and ratifications of acts and stances, from the point of view of an infant or small child coming to understand social order. Even before birth, fetuses are aware of the movement and tone of voice of their mothers (Grimwade, Walker, Bartlett, Gordon, & Wood, 1970; Salk, 1973). These sensations are the perceptual building blocks of infants' rudimentary understandings of another person (Cole & Cole, 1989). And from birth on, infants come to know objects in the world, including themselves and others, through their own sensorimotor actions and interactions with those objects (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

*Actions* such as touching, reaching, sucking, manipulating, and transforming are not only ways of knowing objects, but they are also

fundamental conceptual dimensions of children's representations of objects. For example, actions are fundamental to children's concepts of objects as agents.and patients (Piaget, 1952; Brune, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Bruner, 1986). Objects can be touchers and touchables, reachers and reachables, suckers and suckables, manipulators and manipulatables, transformers and transformables, and, in the case of human objects, interactors and interactables. These sensorimotor identities are some of the first identities that a child constructs in life, and they are derivative of actions in the world.

*Stances* are also building blocks of children's concepts of objects both animate and inanimate. In the course of their first year of life, infants come to recognize and use conventional facial and prosodic markers of affect (Halliday, 1975; Campus & Stenberg, 1981; Cruttenden, 1986). Further, they come to associate particular kinds of affect with particular objects in the world. Studies of the development of social cognition indicate, for example, that infants confronted with a new person or thing will attend to the affective displays of their co-present mothers before deciding on whether or not or how to approach that person or thing. This behavior, called *social referencing,* suggests that infants' understandings of novel persons or things is mediated by the affective stances of mothers (Campos & Stenberg, 1981; Sroufe, Schork, Motti, Larowski, & LaFreniere, 1984). Or, to put it another way, when mothers display a particular affective stance toward a person or thing, they are attempting to construct a social relationship between their child and that person or thing. When children react to novel objects (e.g., by approaching or avoiding) in ways compatible with their mother's affective displays, they ratify their mother's construction of how the child ought to relate to some object. In this way, mother and child *jointly* construct the relationship between the child and some person or thing in the world (Vygotsky, 1978). These joint constructions produced in the course of moment-to-moment interaction socialize infants into how they should think about people around them and provide them with models of how they themselves might use affective displays to create, transform, or destroy relationships and other social identities.

As infants develop their capacity to conceptualize and remember, they come to associate certain actions and stances with the structuring of their own and other's identities. Certain recurrent act and stance displays by certain persons that are routinely ratified by others become

part of the child's experiential knowledge of such fundamental social identities as mother, father, daughter, son, younger sibling, older sibling, or what it means to be a family (Ainsworth, 1982; Dunn, 1984, 1986). One example of how social identity is jointly constituted and socialized through the display and ratification of particular actions comes from research on language socialization in traditional Western Samoan communities (Ochs, 1988). As in many communities, Western Samoans are keenly interested in their child's first word. And, again as in many communities, Western Samoans have expectations about what that first word will be. When asked about the first word of some child in the family, each Samoan caregiver provided the very same word. The first word is *tae,* a fragment of an expression that literally means "eat shit!" That is, in this community, children's earliest meaningful sounds were interpreted and ratified as a particular social act, namely a conventional curse. As infants recurrently are interpreted in this fashion, they become ratified and eventually take on the expected social identity of cursors. One mother articulated the role of others in constituting the young child as cursor as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mother: | . . . you know, when the Samoan kids [say something] |
| Elinor: | ⌊u h  h u h⌋ |
| Mother: | then the Samoan ((pause)) WOMAN you know |
| Elinor: | hmm. |
| Mother: | or Samoan people ⌈said 'Oh! she said "Tae" ((laughs)) *Tae!* |
| Elinor: | ⌊hmm. yeah |
| Mother: | So maybe that's the FIRST word they know ((pause)) |
| Elinor: | hmm. |
| Mother: | *Tae.* And so the people ((empathic particle)), we- we as adults . . . ((laughs)) ((pause)) then we know- then we know |
| Elinor: | Hmm. |
| Mother: | ((soft)) of my- my- my child is starting to first say the word *tae* ⌈or ((pause)) stupid |
| Elinor: | ⌊Yeah ((pause)) swearing a lot ((laughs)) |
| Mother: | stupid. That's a first word but ((pause)) to a kid, |
| Elinor: | Hmm. ((pause)) Hmm. |

| Mother: | to a kid it is ((pause)) he doesn't REALLY mean *tae* |
|---|---|
| Elinor: | Hmm. |
| Mother: | He doesn't. We are translating ⌈into that word *tae* |
| Elinor: | ⌊Hmm. |
| Mother: | because we- we mean he says *tae*. |
| Elinor: | Hmm. |
| Mother: | But to a kid. NO! |
| | ⋮ |
| Mother: | There's a time when they grow up and they know the ((pause)) *tae* is a BAD word |
| Elinor: | Hmm! |
| Mother: | And they hear their parent. They (are) then to say *tae* when they-when you get mad ⌈you know |
| Elinor: | ⌊Hmm! |
| Mother: | And so the kid learns! |
| Elinor: | Hmm! |
| Mother: | When you get mad, you say *tae*. That's why ((pause)) |
| Elinor: | Hmm. mmm. |
| Mother: | uhh- when they call out, they know the word. |

There is a sociocultural concept of the Samoan child as wild and cheeky by nature that underlies this interpretation of the child's first word as a curse. But the point of import here is that this concept of the child as cursor is jointly constructed, maintained, and socialized through on-the-ground social interactions. As this Samoan mother put it, the child makes a sound, others "translate it" into the act of cursing, and eventually the child becomes the cursor she or he is expected "by nature" to be.

Another example of how children come to understand social identity through recurrently displayed actions comes from a language socialization study of American families with young children at dinner time (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992; Ochs & Taylor, 1992a, 1992b; Ochs, in press). A characteristic activity of these family dinners is collaborative or jointly produced storytelling and reporting of the day's events. Those participating in the dinner meal do not merely nod their heads nonchalantly in acknowledgment of an unfolding narrative. Rather, they actively supply and elicit crucial narrative material such as settings, inciting events, psychological states, and actions and consequences among other narrative parts. They also introduce narratives

about other family members present, problematize the way protagonists attempted to resolve a narrative problem, and challenge one another's and other people's versions of the narrative events, such that over the course of the dinner, narratives become co-authored by those present. Such intense co-authoring of narratives is, in our eyes, constitutive of the family itself. Those people participating in the dinner meal constitute themselves as a family not only through the activity of eating together but also through the activity of co-narration. The acts that construct a narrative are also acts that construct a family. Many scholars have noted the socializing power of narrative for children who hear them, but they have primarily focused on the socializing messages carried in the *content* of narratives. The point of the family dinner narrative study is, however, that, beyond content, it is the narrative interaction itself—the joining together of narrative acts from different persons to form a narrative—night after night that socializes co-present children into an understanding of the family. It is of course true that families are legally defined institutions independent of co-authoring stories. But from a child's point of view, a family is what a family *does*. For some children, a family is those persons who recurrently eat dinner together and participate in co-authoring narrative events that they usually have not themselves experienced firsthand. For other children, these activities are not necessarily constitutive of their families. Or, for the same children, these activities may diminish over historical time, thereby transforming their representation of the family. In some cases, the transformation may be gradual; or, as in cases of economic or marital woes or therapeutic interventions, the transformation may be radical. In all case, the identity of the family is an outcome of jointly constructed actions.

## 5. CORRELATIONAL STUDIES OF
## LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

This view of social identity as an inferential *outcome* of linguistically encoded acts and stances goes dead against sociolinguistic analyses that assume social identities as a priori givens, including all correlational studies of language and social identity, where taken-for-granted social

identities are posited as independent variables. In the social constructive approach to identity advocated here, the researcher (and, I might add, the interlocutor as well) asks "What kind of social identity is a person attempting to construct in performing this kind of verbal act or in verbally expressing this kind of stance?" (see Gumperz, 1982). In the social identity-as-a-priori-social-fact approach, the researcher asks "How does a person having this social identity speak?" In correlational studies of urban sociolinguistic variation, the question usually is "How do members of particular socioeconomic, ethnic, or generational groups speak across these situations?" In the case of gender studies the questions are "How do women speak?" and "How do men speak?" In other studies, the question might be "How do caregivers and children or foreigns and locals speak?" We recognize that social identities have a sociohistorical reality independent of language behavior, but, in any given actual situation, at any given actual moment, people in those situations are actively constructing their social identities rather than passively living out some cultural prescription for social identity. Interlocutors are actively constructing themselves as members of a community or professional organization, as persons of a particular social rank, as husbands and wives, as teachers, as foreigners, and even, I dare say, as language learners. In *all* situations, even the most institutionalized and ritualized, people are *agents* in the production of their own and others' social selves. When researchers ask "What does such and such a social identity do?," they *assume* interlocutors are identifying themselves through language as specified by the researcher, but this may not necessary be the case. All situations allow room for play in the social identities that any one person may take on (Duranti, 1981).

In addition to these misgivings, the social-identity-as-a priori-social fact approach at best *under*represents the social meanings that speakers and other interlocutors are accomplishing and at worst *mis*represents those meanings altogether. When researchers treat social identity as an independent variable, they treat that social variable as an *explanation* for language variation. The social identity is the stimulus, and the language behavior is the response. But this is hardly an explanation in that few accounts explain why these *particular* linguistic structures are selected to signal these *particular* social identities. The choice of linguistic structures themselves is treated as *arbitrary*—that is, social identity is often considered to be signaled through arbitrary phonolog-

ical, morphosyntactic, lexical, or discursive structures. When research-
ers focus exclusively on social identity in this way, they do not see *other*
social meanings, *other* social contexts—such as social acts and stances—
that those same linguistic structures encode, and they do not see that, far
from arbitrary, these linguistic structures are linked to social identities
*rationally,* because of systematic cultural expectations linking certain
acts and stances encoded by these linguistic structures to certain
identities. Thus, from a social constructivist perspective, it is not
arbitrary that a speaker might use a linguistic structure, such as a tag
question in English, to project the gender identity of "woman," *if* tag
questions are linguistic resources for constructing the act of requesting
confirmation and the stance of uncertainty and if that act and that
stance are conventionally linked to local sociopolitical realizations for
being a woman (Ochs, 1992).

It has been demonstrated over and over that the fit between social
identity and language behavior is not a tight one and that linguistic
structures cannot be neatly assigned to the purview of one or another
social identity (see Irvine, 1974, and Brown & Levinson, 1979, for
extended discussion). Correlational studies of language and social
identity rely on average frequencies or probabilities of usage and often
cannot account for why some of those recorded use a lingusitic structure
*often,* yet others of supposedly the same social identity hardly use the
same structures *at all,* and why others of supposedly a *different* social
identity may also use those structures.

In an approach that is social constructivist in nature, we can begin
to understand some of this variation. We look first at the kinds of acts
and stances the linguistic features in question are helping to construct
and ask if the variation in frequency of the particular linguistic
structures is because the speakers are attempting to construct different
kinds of social acts and stances. Only then might we ask why some
particular speaker constructs these particular social acts and stances
more often than or in a different fashion from some other speaker. Is it
because local sociocultural entitlements or obligations to construct those
acts or those stances favor certain persons over others? Is it because
society allows for the possibility of act and stance variation within the
same gross social identity, such that people may vary their act and stance
displays to construct themselves and others to be, for example, different
kinds of children, different kinds of parents, different kinds of students,
or different kinds of foreigners? Or can parties use acts and stance

displays to construct, for example, different kinds of families, class-rooms, or, more globally, different kinds of communities? Or is it that some speakers more than others are struggling to *change* social expectations concerning particular social identities through systematically altering their social acts and stances? Or do we find linguistic variation because the same speakers do not necessarily sustain a constant social identity throughout the course of a single interaction with the same interlocutors? The same speakers may shift their acts and stances many times and, in so doing, reconfigure the social identities of themselves and others over a brief period of time. Social identities evolve in the course of social interaction, transformed in response to the acts and stances of other interlocutors as well as to fluctuations in how a speaker decides to participate in the activity at hand.

The social constructivist approach to social identity captures the ebbs and tides of identity construction over interactional time, over historical time, and even over developmental time. It provides a nonarbitrary account of how language can relate to social identity without grammaticizing it. By rooting social identity in the interactional production of acts and stances, the social constructive approach allows us to further understand some of the existential conditions of life in society. Without appearing too glib, we can understand "identity crises" as anxieties over one's inability or failure to achieve some identity through failure to act and feel in some expected or desired way or through the failure of others to ratify those displayed acts and feelings. Within the social constructivist approach, we can examine how different displays of and different reactions to acts and stances give rise to different familial and professional identities. These displays and reactions can be examined for what they reveal about the interactional generation and social orderliness of distressed and dysfunctional relationships. A social constructivist perspective also holds some promise as a means of illuminating how people construct satisfactory lives and a coherent sense of self out of manifold, shifting, momentary identities. A social constructivist approach allows us to examine the building of multiple, yet perfectly compatible identities—identities that are subtle and perhaps have no label, blended identities, even blurred identities. It is just this sort of construction that every language and culture acquirer must learn to accomplish, because there are no simple social or linguistic formulae that spit out how to compose suitable identities for the occasion.

## 6. CULTURAL UNIVERSALS AND DIFFERENCES IN THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Finally, the social constructivist approach illuminates cross-cultural similarities and differences in the production and interpretation of social identity (Gumperz, 1982). Cross-cultural comparisons can be made in terms of conventions for performing and reacting to particular acts and expressing stances, especially linguistic conventions for doing so, and in terms of conventions that tie particular act and stance displays to the construction of particular social identities (Irvine, 1974; Brown & Levinson, 1978).

We could in theory find vast differences in the construction of social identities across communities because communities differ radically in the linguistic conventions for indexing what act or stance is in play at the moment. In practice, however, it appears that there are many cross-cultural similarities in the linguistic construction of social acts and affective and epistemic stances.

Candidate universals in the linguistic structuring of social acts include the use of interrogative pronouns and syntax and rising intonation to construct requests for information and requests for goods and services (Searle, 1970; Clark & Lucy, 1975; Gordon & Lakoff, 1975; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Ervin-Tripp & Gordon, 1984; Goodwin, 1990), the use of tag questions and particles to construct requests for confirmation (Lakoff, 1973; Dubois & Crouch, 1975), and the use of imperatives and address terms to constitute summons and order (Schegloff, 1972; Platt, 1986). Further, probably all societies have affirmative and negative particles to construct the acts of agreement and disagreement and acceptance, rejection, and refusal. In addition, there are commonalities across languages and communities in the linguistic shape of other acts such as greeting, announcing, thanking, assessing, complimenting, claiming, suggesting, granting permission, complaining, and threatening among others.

Universals or near universals also appear in the linguistic marking of epistemic and affective stances, including the marking of relative certainty and uncertainty (Levinson, 1983; Given, 1989), and direct and indirect sources of knowledge (Chafe & Nichols, 1986), surprise, anger, fear, worry, alignment, and pleasure among others (Ochs & Schieffelin,

1989; Besnier, 1990; Irvine, 1990). For example, the stance of certainty is widely marked through factive predicates, determiners, cleft constructions, and other presupposing structures (Levinson, 1983; Givon, 1989), whereas uncertainty is widely marked through modals, rising intonation, and interrogative constructions (Lakoff, 1972). Possible universals in the marking of affective intensity include the use of vowel lengthening, modulation of volume and pace of delivery, use of a morphologically marked form (e.g., use of plural marking for a single referent, use of demonstrative pronoun to refer to a person rather than a thing), and code switching (Stankiewicz, 1964; Duranti, 1984; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989).

Such commonalities in the representation of social acts and stances indicate that human beings share elements of a universal culture. That is, children the world over are being socialized into and acquiring certain common ways of linguistically structuring the world. These commonalities constitute a corpus of basic cultural resources for constituting social identities, and anyone who travels across the borders of their own communities to cultural *terra incognita* brings with them this common repertoire. It is this common human culture that allows us to make some sense of fellow members of our species in intercultural encounters.

Cross-cultural differences in the interactional construction of social identity, I suggest, lie predominantly in the links, or valences as I have referred to them earlier, that obtain between acts and stances on the one hand and social identity on the other. And, it is at this level that intercultural communication often flouders (Gumperz, 1982). Communities often differ in which acts and stances are preferred and prevalent cultural resources for building particular identities. In one community, a stance or act may be widely used to construct some social identity, whereas in another that stance or act is rarely drawn on to construct that identity. For example, Schieffelin and I (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) found that the identities of caregivers and children are constructed differently across societies. In some societies, such as middle class America, the identities of caregivers and infants are constructed through acts and stances that display a great deal of cognitive accommodation by the caregiver to the child, including especially the use of a simplified register in the presence of the infant. In other societies, such as the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea and the Samoan society, the identities of caregivers and infants are constructed by the inverse orientation, namely through acts and stances that display cognitive accommodation by the child to the caregiver (Ochs, 1988;

Schieffelin, 1990). Whereas accommodation by the caregiver is a valued characteristic of middle class American caregivers, in societies such as Western Samóa a caregiver who accommodates in this fashion would not be viewed as a very competent one. Samoan caregivers place heavy emphasis on socializing the infant to attend and accommodate to others as early as possible and try not to engage themselves in communicative activities that would necessitate their linguistic and cognitive accommodation to the infant.

It is important to note that linguistic acts and stances of cognitive accommodation are by no means absent from the Samoan behavioral repetoire—there is a simplified register, for example—but although known to members, these acts and stances are not the preferred resources for constructing the particular identity of caregiver. In part because Samoans see accommodation as a form of respect, accommodating acts and stances, including the use of a simplified register, are resources for constructing the identities of relatively low- and high-ranking persons interacting with one another. Hence, one might use a simplified register to high-ranking foreigns such as missionaries, government workers, teachers, or even anthropologists. But infants and small children do not warrant this demeanor and are, rather, constructed as lower ranking interlocutors who must notice what others are doing, saying, and needing, and they must adjust their own speech to be intelligible to caregivers and other higher ranking persons in their presence. In other words, by not accommodating, Samoan caregivers elicit from infants and small children the very acts and demeanors that construct them as lower in rank. Such complex social and linguistic interactions form the experiential core of language acquisition and socialization. The interactions are the means through which social identities are constructed and socialized. At the same time, act and stance displays and responses are objects of knowledge in themselves that need to be acquired by all those desiring membership in a local community. This experiential core is also what members draw on, for better or for worse, when they cross cultural boundaries.

## 7. TAKING UP THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST CHALLENGE

But what does take place linguistically when culture travelers step over cultural lines to launch novel identities? Do they draw on new

linguistic structures to display familiar acts and stances and to construct old familiar social identities? That is, do they map second language onto first culture?

Are first language structures for indexing acts and stances used creatively to construct culturally new and unfamiliar identities? Can we speak of intercultures just as we speak of interlanguages, and what are the interactional and dialectical processes through which old and new constructs give rise to culturally blended social identities? To return to the immigrant families described in *The New York Times* article (Rimer, 1992), how are old, new, or blends of old and new identities interactionally established from one interactional moment to the next in these families? When children of immigrants are recurrently obliged to translate for parents, how does this act impact the construction of parental and child identities, their relationship to one another, and their relationship to the rest of the world? I offer these questions to the scholars of language acquisition and socialization to pursue. The constructivist approach to social identity is represented in sociology (e.g., conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, and practice theory), anthropology (e.g., linguistic and interpretive anthropology), psychology (e.g., Vygotskian paradigms such as activity theory and the newly formed cultural psychology), and in the history and philosophy of science. Just about the only social science that has not developed a social constructivist paradigm is linguistics. It is, then, high time, indeed an opportune time, for developmental psycholinguistics and developmental sociolinguists, with their interdisciplinary profile and commitment to understanding and promoting the achievement of linguistic competence by all of humankind, to *carpe diem,* and to take up the social constructivist challenge.

## NOTES

1  Pronomial systems would seem an exception to this claim in that pronouns *directly* mark interlocutory identities such as speaker, hearer, other, speaker and hearer, speaker and other, and speaker and hearer and other. In some languages, pronominal systems can also directly encode gender and, more rarely, kinship identities (see Mühlhaüsler & Harré, 1990, for an extended treatment of these systems). In other cases, however, pronouns *indirectly* mark social identity

because they index particular stances associated with those identities. For example, plural or third person forms may be used to refer to an addressee of high rank because they index distance between interlocutors.

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