Identity, persona, performance, style, individuation – just some of the terms that have been variously used in the recently burgeoning field of language and identity studies. In a diverse range of academic fields over the past ten years or so, the topic of language and identity has become one of the primary research areas within the discipline of linguistics. Not only linguists of different persuasions, but also social psychologists, educationalists and sociologists have recently recognized in published form that identity is a key notion in the investigation of human behaviour. With the rise of social media, and the attendant requirement that we account for ourselves in an interconnected world, investigation of identity has become even more relevant during the past decade.

Most of the recent research on the notion of identity adopts the view that it needs to be understood as something negotiated in interaction, as mutable and understood differently dependent on social context. Under this view, identity is considered as performative, with verbal language the most common vehicle for such identity performances. At the same time, linguists and others analysing the performance of identity through a focus on language, acknowledge that performance is always, in effect, multi-modal in nature, and this is reflected in the papers offered here.

Scholars working at the University of Sydney, in recognition of their mutual interest in the discursive construction of identity, in 2010 formed a regular study group of colleagues whose research involved any aspect of language and
identity, using it as means to bring together interested parties for an annual
language and identity symposium. The annual symposium allows invited
speakers and group members alike to present their research in diverse areas
of language use and the negotiation of identity. The symposium held by the
group at the close of 2011 was the motivation to reprise the theme in the ongo-
ing series of Friday seminars organized under the auspices of the Department
of Linguistics at the University of Sydney the following year. Several of the
speakers at the symposium were invited to present a longer version of their
work at a Friday seminar during the first semester of 2012, and other research-
ers in the field of language and identity were also asked to contribute to the
series.

The four papers that appear in this special edition on Language and Iden-
tity are all the product of these Friday seminars, and their very diversity of
approach, data, and perspective attests to the rich and varied nature of the field.
One element that they do share, however, is that they have all been informed,
at some level, by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). On the other hand,
none of the papers are concerned with an argument about lexico-grammar
per se; rather their motivations, and/or their tools for investigating social phe-
nomena make reference to the frameworks provided by SFL. They each regard
the nature of ‘persona’ or identity, not as a stable psychological construct, but
rather as an effect which arises and is negotiated through socially conditioned
communicative performances during the reading of a text, or taken on over
many recontextualized instances. The focus of the papers is therefore on the
nature of semiotic values and the ways identity is construed in all acts of per-
sonal and public communication.

In Bob Hodge’s contribution to this edition ‘What if the revolution never
happened? A thought experiment in linguistics and identity’, he argues that
being a linguist is itself dependent on socio-historical identity creation. He
traces the idea of the identity of Linguistics itself, and that of identifying as a
Linguist, to recent history and the rise of Transformational Generative Gram-
mar in the 1950s. His argument is based on a thought experiment, asking how
the ‘identity’ of Linguistics as a discipline might have been different had the
so-called Chomskyan revolution not occurred when, and as it did. Instead,
he proposes that concurrent work in functional linguistics might have just as
easily taken the global stage and changed the course of linguistic thought. His
paper provides a fascinating back-story to the times in which linguistics as a
discipline came into the spotlight, highlighting a number of other research-
ers working in the area of anthropology and language studies during the latter
part of the twentieth century, among them Gregory Bateson whose work on
communication and psychiatry paralleled the thinking of functional linguists
at that time.
In her paper, “A (Sensitive New Age Guy) with difference): Gendered performances in online personal advertisements’, Kesuma Bakar summarizes the findings of an extensive research project investigating how online personal advertisements in Malaysia both adopt and construe a set of particular Malaysian identities, crafted by their authors to present what they hope is an attractive persona to potential mates. By looking at multi-modal data, her study takes into account intersemiotic patterns to reveal how Malaysians view themselves in relation to other Malaysians. The analysis thus touches on aspects of identity that relate to gender, language, media, culture and interpersonal positioning, and her study opens the way for a more rigorous exploration of what it means to construe identity in a socially-mediated world. It poses questions as to what it actually means to negotiate and project an attractive gendered identity against a background of expectations as to what is ‘normal’ and/or desirable within a particular socio-cultural group, and proposes analytical approaches for tackling such questions.

Alison Moore (‘That could be me: Identity and identification in discourses about food, meat, and animal welfare’) asks much wider questions about our identities as consumers of food and the way that the production of meat on our tables is treated as naturalized in dominant discourses. Using four texts related to the identity of animals – in each text portrayed variously as having persona, experiencing human-like emotions, and as mere cuts of meat – she questions whether the identity of animals as simply useful commodities for the production of food should be maintained given that humans see themselves as ‘humane’. Thus, the paper addresses and problematizes a number of sliding identity issues debated in the media, including the construal of those who identify as vegetarian, against those who see meat-eating as natural. This in turn is used to interrogate the notion of animals having their own identities – identities which are products, in turn, of social discourse. In this sense then, the analysis of the four texts she uses provides a means of examining how the construal of animal identities and meat-eating human identities are construed in dominant discourses. To do this, she uses the device of (semantic) identity chain interaction to reveal how texts create their meanings, and shows how the primary text for this analysis uses our recognition of the recipe genre to parody the naturalized attitudes we as consumers hold towards the animals that are exploited for food.

Mick O’Donnell’s paper ‘Exploring identity through appraisal analysis: A corpus annotation methodology’; takes a completely different approach to the other three papers by looking at the analysis of identity itself, taking a methodological perspective and discussing the ways in which texts can be productively used to investigate the negotiation of identity as a product of repeated stylistic choices. His assertion that ‘Whatever means of analysis we adopt
should be able to show both continuity and variations of persona across the
texts of a writer’, summarizes his own perspective on how sets of texts may
be used to examine the notion of what has variously been referred to as iden-
tity, persona, or style. Here, he focuses on one aspect of identity in this sense:
evaluative disposition, evaluative style, signature, or voice – and specifically,
how corpus annotation analysis using the freely available UAM CorpusTool
(3.0) may be turned to such an investigation. Using Martin and White’s (2005)
Appraisal framework to ground such analysis of evaluative identity, he outlines
a number of perspectives on text/corpus analysis, taking the reader through a
reasoned set of steps for using the CorpusTool which lead to evaluative pro-
files useful for the interpretation of ‘identity’. The approach he advocates takes
the analyst beyond the mere quantification of Attitudinal lexis in the texts and
allows the tracking of both sources and types of attributed Attitudes, as well as
proposing a means for revealing whether a writer favours directly Appraising,
or instead tends to activate a ‘lack’ or ‘denial’ of negative and/or positive Atti-
tudes towards their targets. The tools he outlines will be of great interest for
discourse analysts engaged in tracking the performance of identity through a
focus on the evaluative orientations of any set of texts. It adds further dimen-
sion to work already being carried out using the UAM CorpusTool, and allows
those using the Appraisal framework to extend their annotation of texts in
more intricate ways.

Here’s hoping that the four papers collected here provide both interest and
utility for the discourse analytic community and especially those tackling
issues of identity analysis from a systemic functional vantage point.

References
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