Language and Ethnicity

Carmen Fought

KEY TOPICS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Preface

This book is an introduction to the relationship between human language and **ethnicity**. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the main concepts, issues, and debates, as well as a guide to the key research findings in the field. It is the next volume in the Cambridge series "Key Topics in Sociolinguistics," which is appropriate because language and ethnicity is perhaps the epitome of a key topic in our field. Many of the early **sociolinguistic** studies, which launched an entire research tradition, dealt with the relationship of language to ethnicity. Since then, numerous studies of individual communities in which ethnicity plays a role in language variation have been conducted. There is no single work, however, which provides an overview of the main issues and implications of these studies. There are several volumes with the terms "language" and "ethnicity" or "**ethnic identity**" in the title (e.g. Dow 1991, Fishman 2001), but these have tended to focus on questions of nationalism, language rights, and the role of language competence in group identity, rather than variation within a particular language. In other words, books that say they are about "language and ethnicity" are, in practice, more often about "bilingualism and nationality." Because these macro-issues have been well covered in the literature, I have chosen not to address them in detail here, although where bilingualism or **code-switching** illuminates some interesting facet of identity construction, I have included it in the discussion. Mainly, though, I hope to provide a clear and accessible introduction to how ethnicity affects variation within a language or **dialect**, and particularly how that variation is significant for individuals within a group as they seek to express who they are.

Given theoretical shifts in the field of sociolinguistics such that the construction of identity is now treated as central, it is surprising that we have numerous recent works surveying the role of language in the construction of **gender**, for example (e.g. Coates 1998, Talbot 1998, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), and almost none that survey its role in the construction of ethnic identity at the individual level. There are

in-depth studies of particular **ethnic groups** (e.g. Rickford 1999, Fought 2003) and more recently a few eclectic collections that unite contributions on very disparate topics (e.g. Harris and Rampton 2003), but no one comprehensive work on how the process of constructing an ethnic identity through language works, from start to finish. My goal is to offer the reader a window into the social and psychological processes that are involved in the construction of ethnic identity, and to show how language is both a mirror for reflecting these processes and a part of the process itself. By drawing on research from a wide range of different ethnic groups around the world, I hope to provide readers with a larger picture of how language and ethnicity are related. Moreover, my focus will be on both *form* (**linguistic variables**) and *function* (uses of language), tying together the **variationist** sociolinguistic approach and other, more **discourse**-oriented approaches, which are sometimes treated as secondary in sociolinguistic research but provide valuable insights that cannot be neglected.

I have divided the book into three sections. The first looks at general issues in ethnicity and language, beginning with the question of what we mean by "ethnicity," and moving on to an overview of the complexities of how ethnic identities are constructed through language. The second section looks at the process of constructing ethnic identity in specific groups. There is a chapter each on African Americans and on Latino groups in the USA, both of which have been the focus of copious research. These groups offer two very different windows into the relevant issues, particularly because in one group the variation occurs within dialects of English, while in the other language choice and code-switching both have an important role. Another chapter compares and contrasts the construction of ethnic identity in three very different multiethnic settings around the world. There is also a chapter on the construction of ethnic identity by dominant "white" groups, and one that looks at dialect contact in interethnic settings and how research in this area has informed sociolinguistic theory. The last section focuses on questions of language use. It explores the role of **pragmatics** and **discourse features** in ethnic identity, and how these can lead to miscommunication. It also looks at issues of language prejudice and the consequences of linguistic biases for society. Finally, there is a chapter exploring the relatively new topic of "**crossing**": the use of language associated with an ethnic group to which the speaker does not belong.

I don't know if I would say that language is a sensitive topic, but ethnicity most certainly is, and so I have thought hard at every turn about how to discuss these topics in a way that is both informative

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and ethically responsible. I have done my best to respect everyone. I have tried not to use the words "the African-American community" as if it were one big entity, or talk about what "Latinas" do, as if there were a consensus among them all. I have tried not to act as though the United States is the center of the known universe. I have tried not to claim anything that I could not possibly know without going through the day as a Black South African or an elderly Maori man, or a member of any other group to which I do not belong. I have written about these complex topics in my own voice, which I feel is the only way I could have any hope of addressing them truthfully, even if it means that I deviate at times from the level of formality we normally associate with academic styles. I have tried to tackle complicated and emotionally charged questions with honesty and open admission of the many ways in which I (in particular) or we (in general) simply may not have answers.

Acknowledgments

As I thank the people who have helped me so much in this endeavor, please remember that wherever I have failed in any regard it is my failure alone. I am grateful for the input of the two colleagues to whom I have dedicated this book, John Rickford and Walt Wolfram. When I talk to people in other fields about the mentoring I received as a young scholar in the field of sociolinguistics, they react with envy. I am thankful for all that these two brilliant and compassionate men have done for me and for so many other young scholars in the field, including many women and people of color. I am also grateful to my students. The discussions I have had with them, both in and out of the classroom, inform every aspect of my research and my thinking about language and identity. I am also thankful to Andrew Winnard for a number of helpful suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to my friends and family: my mother and brother who have seen me at my best and at my worst (and made it clear that they love me either way); my friend Martha, who sang "Another One Bites the Dust" over the phone to me when I finished a chapter; and my husband John, who, in addition to everything else he does for me, contributed by 1) agreeing to become the most overqualified research assistant in the country, and 2) making however many pots of (excellent) coffee it took for me to complete each section. Every linguist and author should be so blessed.

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Part I General issues in ethnicity and language

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1 What is ethnicity?

> *Race is not rocket science. It's harder than rocket science.* (Christopher Edley, Jr., Foreword to *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences, vol. 1*, 2001)

As a professor, I've noticed a recent trend of resistance among my students to forms that ask them to specify their ethnicity by checking a box. They see it variously as racist, irrelevant, inaccurate, or nobody's business but their own. Several students have told me that they respond to such forms by marking "other____" and writing in next to it simply "human being." I respect their choice to do this and I applaud their small protest against the way that such forms oversimplify the question of ethnicity in our diverse and complex world. However, I also know as a social scientist that most "human beings" do *not* see themselves as members of a great undifferentiated whole. Whatever our political leanings, however open and accepting of others our character might be, we nonetheless tend to cling to the distinctions among us. Most teenagers in Western societies, for instance, would die of embarrassment if somebody thought that they dressed like, acted like, or talked like their parents. They go to great lengths to avoid this possibility, including developing new **slang** terms and discarding them like used tissues, in an attempt to stay one step ahead of the game. In our heterosexually oriented modern communities, men do not usually like to be mistaken for women and vice versa. Even drag queens, a group that would seem to contradict this idea, enact an identity that relies on the audience's knowing that they are, in fact, biologically male (Barrett 1999). And in any country where multiple ethnic groups are represented, from Australia to Zimbabwe, ethnicity (however we define this term, and it won't be easy) will be a salient factor that social scientists must take into account.

The study of ethnicity (which, you'll notice, I still have not defined) is a field unto itself. Although it has formed a crucial part of the

development of sociolinguistic theory, most linguists, with a few notable exceptions, have spent relatively little time on the definition of ethnic categories in the abstract. But the sand has run out. I cannot in good conscience write a book on the topic of "language and ethnicity," and bring to it expertise only in language, hoping the other half will sort itself out. So I will draw here on the substantial literature that has been produced exploring the central relevant questions: What is ethnicity? How is it related to race? What is an ethnic group? Everyone who knew that I was writing this book has said, "You have to give a definition of ethnicity." Yes, I tell them, thanks so much for the advice. But when volumes have been devoted to exploring this single question, I can hardly get by with hammering out a two-line blurb at the beginning and then just moving on. So I will try in this chapter to give a feeling for the discussion that has taken place in the history of research on race and ethnicity, among scholars much more qualified than I am to address this topic, even though it is impossible to cover the discussion comprehensively in this short space. And, despite the well-meaning advice of friends and colleagues, I leave open the possibility that I may not be able (or willing), in the end, to pin down one single definition of ethnicity for the purposes of this book.

1.1 AREAS OF AGREEMENT ABOUT ETHNICITY

Many (if not most) native speakers of English hear the term "ethnicity" and recognize it as a word they know. But actually delimiting the exact meaning of this word, as is so often true with **semantics**, turns out to be a complex endeavor. Scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, ethnic studies, and even linguistics, have approached this problem in a number of ways, which will be discussed further below. There are, however, a few areas of preliminary agreement about ethnicity across the approaches and disciplines, particularly among the most recent writings on this topic, and I will begin by giving an overview of those commonalities.

First, scholars across the disciplines (and I include the linguists here as well) agree that ethnicity is a ***socially constructed*** *category*, not based on any objectively measurable criteria. For a while the term "ethnicity" was used as if it were the socially defined counterpart to the biologically defined "race." The problem, of course, is that years of scientific research have failed to yield any reliable biological

rubric for grouping human beings into racial categories. As Zelinsky reports:

> After decades of effort during which many classificatory schemes were proposed, then rejected, physical anthropologists have finally admitted defeat. It has proved impossible to arrive at a set of quantifiable morphological and physiological features whereby we can unequivocally compartmentalize all human beings into a small array of discrete races. (2001:8)

Omi and Winant use the term "racial formation" for the social construction of race, more specifically for "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994:55). I will return to the relationship of ethnicity and race in a moment, but the main point here is that both of these categories must be treated as socially constructed, and this reality must be incorporated into any definition we might use.

On the other hand, the fact that "ethnicity" and "race" may be socially constructed *does not mean they are purely hypothetical concepts* that have no basis in reality. A number of studies acknowledge the presence of a line of thinking of this type in the earlier research, and Bobo, for example, notes that even up to the present some scholars have "argued vigorously for discontinuing the use of the term 'race'" (2001:267). However, a majority of recent works insists that these concepts are both real and crucial, and it is perilous to dismiss them as mere constructs. Zelinsky notes, "In terms of practical consequences, race as something collectively perceived, as a social construct, far outweighs its dubious validity as a biological hypothesis" (2001:9). In a similar vein, Smelser et al. say:

> The concepts of race and ethnicity are social realities because they are deeply rooted in the consciousness of individuals and groups, and because they are firmly fixed in our society's institutional life. (2001:3)

Regardless of the social relativity of their definitions, or of whether we believe that race and ethnicity should or should not have the prominent role in society that they have, we cannot dismiss them as having no basis in reality. The ideologies associated with them create their own social reality.

Another point of general agreement is that ethnicity *cannot be studied or understood outside the context of other social variables*, such as gender or social class. Urciuoli (1996:25ff.), for example, discusses in detail the conflation of class and race, and how, in the dominant ideologies,

this can lead to an automatic association of certain ethnic groups with "the underclass." As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the speakers in the Puerto-Rican American community that Urciuoli studied often equated becoming more middle class with becoming more white. With respect to gender, Bucholtz notes that "any performance of ethnicity is always simultaneously a performance of gender" (1995:364); Omi and Winant express a very similar idea, saying, "In many respects, race is gendered and gender is racialized" (1994:68). As noted earlier, the construction of identity by individuals is a complex and multifaceted process in which ethnicity may be only one note, possibly not even the dominant note, at a particular moment. I have touched on these ideas only briefly here, but I will return to and develop them repeatedly throughout the discussion.

In addition, most works on race and ethnicity acknowledge the important roles of *both self-identification and the perceptions and attitudes of others* in the construction of ethnic identity. As Smelser et al. note, the categories of race and ethnicity are to some degree imposed by others and to some degree self-selected (2001:3). In modern societies that value self-determination and respect the right of each individual to define himself or herself, it is easy to fall back on the utopian idea that a person's race or ethnicity is whatever he or she says it is. But while this can be true on one level, on another level one cannot be completely free of the views and attitudes of others in the society. There are numerous references in the literature to the explicit need of community members to be able to categorize others ethnically (and in other ways). Omi and Winant see this as particularly true of race:

> One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race . . . This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize – someone who is, for example, racially "mixed." (1994:59)

A Puerto-Rican American woman in Urciuoli's study commented, "[T]he people at work try to categorize me, keep trying to get out of me what I am *really*. Really Spanish? Really black? Really East Indian?" (1996:144). **Phenotype** may play a particularly crucial role in the community's categorizations. Anulkah Thomas (personal communication) reports the experience of a Panamanian girl of African descent who was told by a teacher to check "black" on the census form because "that's what people see when they look at you." The need of others to categorize an individual's race and ethnicity forms a part of the context in which that individual constructs his or her identity.

I myself have been the subject of **ascription** to an ethnicity I would not normally claim. My father was a generic white American with no association to a particular European ancestry. My mother is from Madrid, Spain. On census forms, I would normally check "white" as my race. Still, the legal definition of Hispanic by the US Office of Management and Budget is: "All persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (Smelser et al. 2001:xxviii). By this definition, I qualify as at least half-Hispanic. Phenotypically, some people have told me that I look to them like I could be "a Latina," a perception which is probably enhanced by my being a native speaker of Spanish and my being named "Carmen." My students usually know that I am fluent in Spanish, and that I have conducted research on Chicano English. As a result of these factors, I believe, an undergraduate who thanked me and another professor (who was from Mexico) in her senior thesis referred to us as "two strong Latinas." Among other things, I think this points to the important role of language in ethnic identity ascription. The fact that I felt a small thrill of pleasure at this involuntary moment of "**passing**" also says something about what it means to be a member of the dominant ethnic group, a topic to which I will return in Chapter 6.

A good **ethnographic study** of the role of the community in defining ethnic membership is Wieder and Pratt's (1990) research on the Osage tribe. All communities (and **communities of practice**) will have norms for evaluating who is and is not a member, sanctions for behaviors the group considers unacceptable, and so forth. Probably because of the historical implications of membership in certain tribes, there is much overt discussion in some Native-American communities of who is or is not "a real Indian."[1] The answer to this question about ethnic identity can have repercussions in many practical areas, such as determining who is registered as a member of a particular tribe, who is entitled to government services or health care, or who can vote in tribal elections. Side by side with these is a completely different set of concerns, related to the historical oppression of Native Americans, including issues about who has "sold out" versus maintaining pride in their culture.

Wieder and Pratt (1990) found that a number of factors outsiders (particularly European Americans) might consider to be important in defining group membership are quite useless and may even disqualify the individual in question from true status as a "real Indian." Instead, they treat being a "real Indian" as a process, rather than a static category. What is of most interest here is the constant reference to

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