

# Identity in interculturality: Using (lack of) cultural knowledge to disalign with an identity category

## Keywords

conversation analysis, identity,  
interculturality, cultural knowledge,  
interaction

This article focuses on the notions of interculturality and identity. It outlines some of the ways in which identities can be made relevant in conversation when interactants orient to certain items of cultural knowledge that are normatively bound to those identity categories. By analyzing a brief instance of naturally-occurring talk, the study shows how identities are used as interactional resources to help accomplish social actions such as providing an account or disagreeing, in addition to aligning and disaligning with other people.

本論では、異文化性とアイデンティティの概念に焦点を当てる。対話の参加者が、一連の会話の中でどのようにアイデンティティを表象するのか、その方法を詳細に考察する。このようなアイデンティティは、アイデンティティ・カテゴリーと密接に関連した文化的知識に参加者自身が適応することで具現化される。実際の自然会話のある断片を分析することで、アイデンティティが他者との「協調」、「不協調」、「理由付け」、「意見の相違の示唆」などといった社会的行為の達成を促すインタラクションのリソースとしてどのように使用されるのかを実証する。

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Classrooms in which students come from different cultural backgrounds frequently provide opportunities for intercultural conversation. However, this does not mean that cultural difference should be viewed as an inevitable and omnipresent element of such settings. In recent years there has been a growing body of research into interculturality as a topic worth exploring in itself, rather than as an underlying reason to explain the motives behind a given instance of interaction (Higgins, 2007; Mori, 2003; Nishizaka, 1997).

A major thread that underpins such research is that intercultural identities are co-constructed in and through interaction and consequently become communicative resources for speakers. Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) note that it is not that people:

passively or latently have this or that identity which then causes feelings and actions, but that they work up and work to this or that identity, for themselves and others, there and then, either as an end in itself or towards some other end (p. 2).

In terms of interaction then, we are defined not by who we are, but by how we show others who we are, and this can be monitored on a moment-by-moment, turn-by-turn basis, both by those participating in the conversation and by discourse analytic researchers who examine the sequential accomplishment of identity in talk.

Although so-called native speakers are often assumed (by themselves or others) to have expert knowledge associated with their home culture (Rampton, 1996), this can be called into question. This paper will present a short segment of classroom talk recorded at an international school in Japan. In it we will examine how the nationality of one of the participants is occasioned through the talk, and how by rejecting that identity category he is able to disavow his obligation to possess the cultural knowledge that goes with it.

### The CA approach to identity

Identity can be a rather slippery topic to research, partly because it is popularly understood to exist somewhere in an individual's head. However, the related discourse analytic approaches of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA)<sup>1</sup> locate identity outside the head by limiting their findings to those aspects of identity that are made publicly available via interaction. That is, identity is not something we *are*, but something we *do*.

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998, p. 3) sum up the CA/MCA approach to identity as follows:

Having an identity means being cast into a category with associated features. The speaker may cast herself in some identity category, or others might do the casting.

- Such casting is indexical and occasioned within the sequential context of the talk.
- Interactants use these identity categories, making them relevant to the interactional business at hand.
- Once mobilized, an identity category becomes consequential for the ongoing talk, potentially influencing what the next speaker does.
- Most importantly, we can see all of this through a careful bottom-up consideration of the details of the interaction itself. We do not have to appeal to our own external understandings of what might be relevant. We can

base our arguments on what the participants themselves do in the next turn.

In short, CA/MCA's observations about identity are firmly situated in the talk itself. Some other forms of discourse analysis, such as Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (Norton, 2000) or Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001), tend to explain identity in terms of broader political discourses, repertoires and ideologies, which inevitably reflect the researcher's own philosophical position. However, CA's deeply descriptive approach bases its arguments on moment-by-moment interactionally displayed understandings, and strives to reduce the researcher's personal views in the analysis.

### The data

The segment of talk to be examined in this paper was video-recorded in a 12<sup>th</sup> grade English class at an international school in Japan, and represents just 28 seconds from a corpus of over 20 hours of naturally-occurring talk. The class had finished early, so the teacher decided to play a few rounds of the commercially available game *Outburst*. In the transcript we will analyze, the students are competing in small groups to come up with a list of ten cities beginning with the letter D. The students' lists were later compared with a card from the game and a point was given for any city that was listed on the *Outburst* card, except if another group had also thought of it. The focus of the current analysis is on how Ryan, an American raised in Japan, disaffiliates himself from the American students in a nearby group and uses that as an interactional resource to explain why he cannot think of any cities starting with D.

Each of the four students in Ryan's group is 17 years-old and is fluent in both Japanese and English. May is Korean-Japanese, Anya is American-Japanese, Nina is British-Japanese and Ryan is an American who has lived in Japan for sixteen of his seventeen years. The transcript<sup>2</sup> begins after the group has been quietly compiling their list together on a piece of paper for around one and a half minutes, coming up with city names such as Dallas, Denver, and D.C.

#### Extract 1: Amerikan desho

01 May: Eh du-du-duke. =

02 Nina: =°>(I was also thinking

1 In his lectures between 1964 and 1968, Sacks originally developed MCA as a related but separate approach to CA (see Sacks, 1992), and while there are some researchers who focus more on MCA, most recognize that an intimate knowledge of CA is also required. The author concurs with Schegloff (2007) who retrospectively typifies Sacks' work on MCA as a set of interactional practices for referring to people—something which involves more general CA projects such as *doing description* and *word selection* (p. 463). Sacks used the term *membership categories* to refer to what I term here as *identity categories*.

2 The transcript is based on the conventions devised by Gail Jefferson (as outlined in Schegloff 2007). See Appendix for details.

03 of)< Devon but the game's understand-NEG IP  
 04 American° (No, I) don't know.  
 05 (0.7) 39 Anya: =[°Wakannai y(h) o°]  
 06 May: (ii yo) understand-NEG IP  
 good IP (No, I) don't know.  
 (That's) okay.  
 07 Nina: ((looks to Ryan))  
 08 Tchr: 'MEMBER YOU'VE GOT  
 09 THIRTY SECONTS.  
 10 Ryan: °mm.°  
 11 (0.3)  
 12 Nina: There's ten right.  
 13 Anya: ° (Te:::[:n?] °  
 14 Nina: ((to May) °° [(jukko)°°  
 ten  
 15 (0.4)  
 16 Ryan: °I dunno°  
 17 (0.9)  
 18 \$Prolly'n American game  
 19 [so they should know,=  
 20 [(points to other group))  
 21 =[I(h)]'m no(h)t American.\$  
 22 May: [ eh?]  
 23 ((clunk))  
 24 May: tch kore-unibaasity jan.  
 this university COP-NEG  
 This is a university.  
 25 (0.3) ((Nina looks at Ryan))  
 26 Ryan: hm(h)ph. Dookt[(n I dunno)  
 27 [(clunk))  
 28 Ryan: Ma:ybe they have  
 29 ((points to paper))  
 30 their own [ city . ]  
 31 Anya: >[Duke-du-duke].<  
 32 Let['s juss wride]dit down.  
 33 Ryan: [it sort'v is.]  
 34 (0.7) ((Nina turns to Ryan))  
 35 Nina:→ Amerikan desho?  
 American TAG  
 (You're) American, right?  
 36 ((touches Ryan with pen))  
 37 → Wakannai no.=  
 understand-NEG IP  
 Don't you know?  
 38 Ryan: =[ \$ Wakkanai yo. \$ ]

The focal turn comes in lines 35-37, when Nina refers to Ryan's nationality in making relevant an account for his lack of knowledge on a USA-related topic. As it turns out, this is in fact a friendly jibe rather than a serious request, as evidenced by the laughter that follows Ryan's response.

However, in order to fully understand how this identity-relevant action comes about, we need to return to the start of the sequence and establish what leads up to Nina's turn. There are two simultaneous threads of talk that converge to allow Nina to deliver the jibe.

The first involves a request for an expert authentication on a point of cultural knowledge. In line 1, May suggests *Duke*, although later she self-initiates repair on this suggestion, treating it as a problematic candidate for the list because it is the name of a university rather than a city (lines 22 and 24). This is followed by a brief gap of silence (line 25) in which Nina appears to gaze-select Ryan as next-speaker, arguably due to his nationality and the associated knowledge that can be assumed to go with it. However, Ryan's response in lines 26-30 is anything but knowledgeable. After a suppressed laugh (Greer et al., 2006), Ryan reworks *Duke* into something that could be the name of a city, *Dookt(n)* (i.e. *Duketon*) and then asserts a hedged claim that there may be a city called *Duke*. Given that the group has something to gain from retaining May's suggestion on the list, Ryan's mitigation here (and in line 33) can be heard as working to impede May's attempts to reject the word *Duke* and indeed, partly due to Anya's strong insistence (lines 31-32), *Duke* does eventually make it on to the list.

Occurring concurrently to this, however, there is a second thread of talk which can be characterized as a self-deprecation sequence. It originates

in lines 2-4, when Nina uses the word *American* indexing the origin of the game as part of an account for why a British city is unlikely to be on the approved list. After the intervening talk discussed above, Ryan also makes relevant the game's origin, this time in relation to his own nationality, and that of a nearby group of students: *Proolly 'n American game so they should know—I'm not American* (Lines 18-21). Since Ryan points his thumb over his shoulder to them as he produces the first part of this turn, the word *they* here clearly refers to the students in the other group, two of whom are Americans who have lived in the United States. Ryan's turn seems to be linking the nationality of those in the other group to the sort of category-bound cultural knowledge that is required for this task, using it as an account for why he does not have access to that knowledge. As an American raised in Japan, he is disaffiliating from the American students in the rival group and aligning instead with the other members of his own group, none of whom has spent significant time in the US.

It is at this point that May self-selects in overlap with Ryan's turn (line 21) to initiate repair on Duke: Ryan's turn in lines 26-30 and the turn increment he adds in line 33 serve as further timely evidence that he does not possess the sort of cultural knowledge that is bound to the identity category *American*. In line 35 (*Amerikan desho?/You're American*), Nina disagrees with Ryan's claim in line 21 (*I'm not American*), and since disagreement is the sort of action that regularly follows self-deprecation (Pomerantz, 1984), we can claim that Nina heard Ryan's turn that way. She then follows this with a mock request for clarification (*wakannai no/Don't you know?*), a rhetorical question that clearly links assumed knowledge to the category. Although the turn is formulated as a clarification request, Nina is not simply checking for understanding or initiating repair, since she is fully aware that Ryan is American. Instead, her turn here can be understood as a sort of light-hearted accusation, perhaps rebuking Ryan for his attempt to explain away his lack of knowledge, and, by extension, his lack of contribution to the group's immediate task of compiling the list. The participants treat this not as a serious argument but as a playful jibe, as evidenced by the laughter in the ongoing talk: Nina is carrying out a *laugh-with* rather than a *laugh-at* (Glenn, 1995), which ultimately aligns with Ryan. By casting himself outside the identity category *American*, Ryan is *talking into being* (Gafaranga & Britten, 2005) some other

relevant category, and although it is never stated directly in the conversation, there is evidence to suggest that this category might be something like *American raised abroad*—an American by ancestry, but with a different set of socio-cultural experiences.

It is worth noting that when Nina delivers her mock request for clarification in line 37 (*wakannai no*), her eye gaze and body language make it clear that she is directing her question to Ryan and therefore selecting him as next-speaker (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). What then can we make of the fact that Anya also self-selects to respond in overlap with Ryan in line 37? In terms of sequential, turn-by-turn displays of self, Anya is assuming the discourse identity (Zimmerman, 1998) of *self-selected next speaker* (Sacks et al, 1974), but this also implicates her in the identity category *American raised abroad*, which Ryan has invoked. As the only other co-present participant with an American parent, casting herself as next speaker allows Anya to align with Ryan and imply that she too has limited knowledge of the US.<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

Identities do not just exist. They are first and foremost used to do things. In this instance we have seen that the identity category *American* was employed by Ryan in the enactment of self-deprecation and to account for why another group might hold an advantage in the game. It was also subsequently used by Nina as part of a disagreement turn that implicitly acknowledged Ryan's disalignment with the category. One of the ways participants accomplish these actions is by making use of attributes and actions that are bound, or linked, to the identity category that is in play (Sacks, 1992). In the sequence we have examined, the category-bound attribute was *cultural knowledge*, and the participants' self-claimed lack of that knowledge was used to distance themselves from the identity category *American*.

The vast majority of the classroom talk recorded between these students was not par-

3 Anya's original Japanese utterance *wakannai y(h)o* in line 39 may present other interpretations, such as *No, he doesn't know*, which would be hearable as ridiculing Ryan. This, however, is not supported by what happens in next turn, as Ryan seems to interpret Anya's turn as affiliative by smiling and not displaying any particular offense toward her. He glances at Nina and then the table, but does nothing in particular to show that he heard Anya's turn as disaffiliative.

ticularly intercultural in nature. In the sequence we have examined here however, their relative national identities were made relevant, and, for a brief moment, interculturality was foregrounded by and through the talk. Interculturality and identity are continually being reified through countless instances of mundane interaction, but the analyst's challenge is to demonstrate how and when they become relevant. CA/MCA's careful, emic approach allows us to track identity-in-interaction by basing claims on the participants' observable actions at that time and place.

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## Appendix

The appendix for this article is available online at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2010\_03a.pdf>.