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The intimate alterity of identity

Matthew Clarke

A. The intrigue of identity

Identity, as a concept, has long fascinated me. This is no doubt to some degree due to an itinerant childhood during which I attended nine different schools in the UK, US and Canada. This process required ongoing adaptation on my part – including, but not limited to, adopting different accents and vocabularies – in the process raising questions as to who ‘I’ was and how this I was related to the others against whom I repeatedly reworked and redefined ‘myself’. This interest was carried over into questioning what it meant to be a teacher, and how my teaching self related to other parts of who I was, when, after undergraduate studies in politics and philosophy, I entered teaching. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that my doctoral studies a decade later focused on the evolving identities of new English language teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where, for a number of years, I led the development of a new Bachelor of Education degree designed to prepare female Emirati school leavers to become teachers of English to young learners. One of the key arguments of this research was that teacher identities – including, but not limited to, language teacher identities – are never just pedagogical but are political insofar as they are constructed through liminal processes of inclusion and exclusion whereby the self is defined through an ‘antagonistic’ process of constructing contrasts in relation to some excluded other(s) (see Clarke, 2008). Much of my subsequent research has sustained this engagement with questions relating to the concept of identity, particular its ethical and political dimensions, within the broader field of education policy and politics. Alongside this ongoing engagement with

identity, my itinerant lifestyle has also been sustained; after leaving the UAE, I worked at universities in Hong Kong and Australia, before recently returning full-circle to take up my current position in England.

B. The indispensability and impossibility of identity

Despite having completed my doctoral study on the discursive construction of language teacher identities over a decade ago, and my research having moved away from applied linguistics, I remain intrigued by identity's complexities and contradictions. I find myself repeatedly returning to the questions of language and discourse, power and politics, desire and affect, embodied in identity. I am fascinated by its paradoxical nature, as something that is at once individual and social, symbolic and material, familiar but alien, impossible yet also indispensable – by what Derrida (1998) describes as the 'disorder of identity'. In this sense, the notion of identity seems to capture the fractured nature of human existence, tracing both its restless yearning and the impossibility of its satisfaction, itself reflecting the ungraspable and complexity of existence, caught in the void between ungraspable depth of material space and the unfathomable ephemerality of time.

My recent work has moved away from an explicit focus on language teachers and language teaching contexts to focus on the broad field of education policy. Much of it has involved critical analyses of education policy discourses in the context of neoliberal schooling in Western contexts, including Australia, the UK and the US. This work includes critical analyses of the way neoliberal education policy, and the discourses it embodies, positions teachers and refashions their identities. A recurring theme in much of my recent work has been the alienating potential of identity, as mediated through symbolic (dis)identifications with policy as text and

discourse. Such alienation is manifested in the sense of disempowerment and deep anxiety many teachers, including language teachers, experience in relation to neoliberal demands for audit and accountability; but it also raises questions about if and how teachers can retain a sense of identification with values and ideals that may be at odds with the source of their alienation, as well as questions about whether and how teachers may be complicit in the perpetuation of policies with which they *disidentify*.

This work has necessitated an ongoing theoretical engagement with language and identity, as well as with politics and ethics – something reflected also in language teacher identity research. As Brian Morgan and I wrote in a chapter surveying the place of identity in research in second language teaching and learning (Morgan & Clarke, 2011, p. 825), “perhaps the most significant development in language teacher identity research is the turn towards values, morals and ethics”. This in turn raises questions of agency and determinism in relation to identity – questions which, in turn, return us to language and discourse.

In thinking through the problematic of identity and its relation to language and discourse, I have found psychoanalytic theory an invaluable resource, particularly its Lacanian incarnation. Lacan’s work is particularly significant for language teacher identity given the prominent place of language (part of the ‘symbolic’ register). For Lacan, identity is a site of conflict, fragmentation and alienation, rather than harmony, completeness or self-sufficiency, something that echoes the struggle many language teachers experience in relation to identity formation. Characteristic of such struggles is often a desire to reach a state where we will finally recognize ourselves, and be recognised by others, as who we want to be or think we truly are – a goal that remains illusive. Lacanian psychoanalysis explains this tendency in terms of the role of ‘mirroring’ in identity formation, including imaginary identifications with the specular image of

the (m)other and symbolic identifications with the demands and desires of the Other embodied in law, language and discourse. In each case, the source of our identities lies outside us, meaning we are never quite 'at one' with ourselves; yet we have to be 'someone' and so we spend our lives trying to recuperate this 'loss' of a unified self through unconscious repetition, following the restless, interminable and unstaunchable flow of desire that is perhaps the essence of our being. Identity remains at once indispensable and impossible.

C. The intimate alterity of identity

From the perspective of language teacher identity, I see this restlessness reflected in the continual quest for the perfect method, the perfect lesson or the ideal language learner with total fluency or complete accuracy. Of course, such quests for perfection never reach their goal; and even when they do this merely triggers a subsequent search for an even better method or lesson. In psychoanalytic terms, this is because we cannot cope with the surplus enjoyment that would result from the full satisfaction of our desires; hence rationalizing obstacles that conveniently keep such full satisfaction at bay is one of the characteristic ways in which individuals and groups sustain desire through the construction of fantasies. Such fantasies may assume beatific (utopian) or horrific (disaster oriented) versions and typically involve the identification of a scapegoat ('refugees', 'migrants', 'the unemployed', 'the bankers', 'lazy students'), whose presence and activities are deemed to represent an obstacle to the realisation of a idealised, harmonious utopian world, and the fully realised identities that would blossom as a result were it not for the troublesome other, *or* to herald a descent into some disaster scenario as a result of this other. Either way, such fantasising sustains desire and as such – since desire is always desire of the other, whether this be the desire for that which the other deems desirable, *or* the desire to

attain the other's approval – preserves the other's alterity within the intimacy of our identities. On the one hand, as social beings, we all seek the sense of belonging, uniqueness and oneness that identity promises to deliver; on the other hand, we can only achieve this sense by identifying with something external to ourselves, something other, which undermines any secure sense of self-sufficiency.

Hence, my reading of identity, including language teacher identity, is as an ongoing and never-finalised process of construction and appropriation, characterized by intimate alterity. This conception seeks to capture something of the multiple paradoxes that come into focus in the notion of identity. These paradoxes are hardly surprising given that the signifier – that basic element of the languages we use to construct our identities – is defined in terms of what it is not and is hence characterized by a simultaneous flickering between absence and presence (Eagleton, 1996). Language, in this sense, is never something we can fully grasp as ours. As poststructuralism argues, all language originates in the other, in that it precedes and exceeds our individual existence, for how else could it function as a shared resource that serves our common, yet also disparate, purposes? In this sense, language does not have to be foreign or second to be othering and may be alienating even when it feels most familiar and comfortable – as Derrida (1998, p. 25) observes, “I have only one language and it is not mine. ... My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other”. Indeed, our most familiar ‘tongue’ is the language of the other in another sense, insofar as our everyday expression emerges from the other of our unconscious; for unless we are reading from a prepared speech or set of detailed notes, when we speak we literally do not know what we are saying (Verhaeghe, 1995). Whether we view language as originating in the other of history and society or as emerging from our unconscious, in each and all of these different senses, even when we

appropriate language, using it to shape our identities, an element of alterity subsists within our most intimate selves. In other words, our identities are 'extimate', simultaneously interior and exterior, just like the two continuous sides of the möbius strip, formed by twisting and fastening the ends of a strip of paper.

D. The implications of identity: Researching the void in a time of crisis

Notorious for his impenetrable language and enigmatic pronouncements, Lacan famously claimed that the unconscious is structured like a language. One of the ways of understanding this is to view the unconscious as a kernel of the real – as a sort of lack or void, around which the symbolic system of language circulates without ever being able to fully coincide with it.

Recognizing this lack in the symbolic other opens possibilities for creative agency on the part of the subject by allowing its desire to assume the space opened by the other's lack. Another way of reading the unconscious is, not so much as a repository, but as an ongoing process in which elements from the symbolic that are surplus in some way to our processing capacities are repressed, only to re-emerge at some later point in our lives with potentially disruptive effects. We can also think of the unconscious at a collective, group level, as in Raymond Williams' notion of 'structures of feeling' or Frederic Jameson's conception of the 'political unconscious'. These readings of the unconscious – and they are by no means exhaustive – suggest various possibilities for research.

The notion of a political unconscious, for instance, has particular relevance at the current time. As I write, unprecedented numbers of refugees and migrants continue to arrive here in Europe from Africa and the Middle East as a result of the various crises and disasters unfolding in these regions. Meanwhile, the response on the part of Europe, as evidenced by mainstream

media and political commentary, is an uneasy mixture of racially-based fear and economic suspicion, with talk of the inevitable and irresistible forces of globalization, so readily wheeled out to justify neoliberal economic policies, conveniently forgotten. The European political unconscious seems intent on disavowal of the role played by past and present colonial activities, including discriminatory protectionist economic policies, in, for example, agriculture, as well as more overtly imperialist military misadventures, in fomenting and sustaining these crises. This comes on top of decades in which education and other areas of public life have been reconfigured as private commodities rather than public goods, governed by logics of competition rather than collaboration.

For education and language education research, these events raise significant issues. Amongst these are questions regarding whether, and to what degree, educators' individual and collective identities are co-opted into complicity with, and hence implicated in, the erosion of compassion and the deligitimation of dissent embodied in policy and practice in the neoliberal era? To what degree does the reframing of language teaching and education more broadly in terms of logics of individualism and competition, standards and accountability, now constitute our identities and what psychic spaces might exist for meaningful resistance? How do the individual and collective dimensions of the 'political unconscious' come together in the identification of 'problems' that serve as the recurrent foci for policy conception, formulation and enactment, such as research into closing various performance 'gaps'? How might these recurrent themes obscure or erase the visibility of other issues, such as how various achievement gaps reflect and sustain the very policies and practices that produce them, preventing these other issues from becoming the focus of policy or research? And how do teachers manage tensions between their own values and ideals and the exhortations and demands of policy texts and

discourses that they are required to enact and with which they are expected to identify? This last question is something I am currently exploring with my co-author, Alex Moore (see Moore & Clarke, forthcoming), in relation to teachers' attachment to notions of professionalism. Specifically, we are exploring how teacher professionalism has been infused with neoliberal discourses of performativity so as to emphasise logics of competition and accountability as a result of recent education policy, in ways that alienate many teachers' professional identities which remain attached to older, more collegial versions of professionalism.

E. Directions for future research

The issues identified above are clearly equally relevant for language teacher identity, given that language education is often on the 'frontline' in the (re)education of refugees and migrants and has not escaped the terrors of neoliberal performativity that have been visited on the education sector more broadly. But in addition, recognition of the role of psychoanalytic notions, such as the unconscious, desire, and the imaginary, symbolic and real registers of the psyche, raises intriguing questions for language teacher identity research, which include, amongst other things, thinking about how symbolic identification operates across multiple languages and how this might be experienced similarly and/or differently among teachers and learners. It raises question about how desire and affect, in conflict or concert with rational cognition and consciousness, play out in the formation of language teacher identities. How might psychoanalytic notions, such as desire and the unconscious, be taken up in language teacher identity research? What is the role of desire in the formation of language teacher identities? How does the psychoanalytic notion of identity as extimate – an intimate alterity that is neither interior nor exterior yet both simultaneously – challenge, question and complicate the atomistic, psychology-derived notion of

the individual that has been an abiding characteristic of applied linguistics, including conceptions of language teacher identity?

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