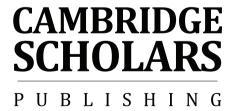# Discoursal Construction
# of Academic Identity in Cyberspace

Discoursal Construction
of Academic Identity in Cyberspace:
The Example of an E-Seminar

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to specify and investigate the linguistic means of academic identity construction in electronic discourse, on the example of an Internet discussion group (also referred to as an electronic seminar or e-seminar). The development of the Internet and computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) has affected the world of academia, both globally and locally. First of all, these new network technologies have intensified the global academic exchange and internationalisation of scholarship. The deriving changes include the restructuring of contemporary academic institutions and networks of social relations, which in effect, increases their mobility and lack of stability. The progressing expansion of new technologies has also had consequences for language: new communicative situations have transformed the existing genre repertoires of an academic community and caused the emergence of novel electronic genres. All these changes have, in turn, generated new mechanisms of identity construction both for institutions and individuals, which is reflected in the discursive practices of an academic community.

In view of the above changes, contemporary linguistics has faced a challenge of investigating academic communication phenomena in cyberspace, and in particular, the mechanisms of identity construction in electronic discourse. An important research question is to compare how interpersonal meanings are realised in academic electronic discourse with how they are realised in "traditional" academic speech and writing. In this way, it will be possible to evaluate the relation between academic identity constructed by members of an academic community in cyberspace with identity constructed in real life.

What follows from the Hallidayan conceptual framework of language as social semiotic, there is a close relation between language use and the social context. More precisely, language is viewed as a product of the social processes and therefore should be interpreted within the broader socio-cultural context. The view of language as social semiotic also foregrounds the dual role of language. Language is not only to exchange information but also has a significant function of communicating identities and relationships. "By their everyday acts of meaning, people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing

and transmitting the shared system of value and knowledge" (Halliday 1978, 2; see also the dual role of communication in N. Thompson's discussion of language and communication, 2003, 10–12). This means that the social structure is implicated in Halliday's framework, which carries major implications for linguistic research of identity.

First of all, an individual's identity should be viewed as a social category, dynamically constructed in relation to social structures an individual is a member of and his/her social roles. However, it is also necessary to account more explicitly for an individual's active role in identity construction. As N. Thompson points out, "to a large extent, I choose who I am through my actions and interactions" (2003, 26). An individual's identity is socially constructed, but the effect of social forces is not deterministic. Rather individuals themselves reflexively draw on a number of socially available resources for the construction of identity, including institutional practices, values and beliefs (Giddens 2001, 4–6).

Secondly, linguistic theories of identity must address the increasing complexity of contemporary social life and its progressing diversification, the changes that affect individuals, communities and institutions. In the postmodern era, dominated by communications media, the issue of an individual's identity becomes more problematic and unsettled as societies become "displaced", structurally differentiated, fragmented and culturally pluralistic (Castells 1997; Giddens 2001). This has resulted in the advancement of more pessimistic accounts of identity. Some postmodern theories of identity are based on the premise that new communication technologies have caused a digital revolution and, as a result, undermined the stability and credibility of the self, requiring from an individual the formation of a new consciousness (e.g. Gergen 1996). In addition, as Mudyń (2002) points out, the ongoing digital revolution is responsible for the changes in the psychological condition of a contemporary human being, even if an individual avoids direct contact with the new technologies. On the other hand, researchers also argue (e.g. Barnes 2003; Turkle 1996) that although identity has become an unstable choice, the new era has brought the diversity and increased the possibilities of effective self-presentation.

The same ambivalence appears in the discussion of the changes in the formation and functioning of contemporary communities. For one thing, as a result of the digital revolution, the world has become a "global village", the term coined by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s to express his conviction that electronic communication would unite the world. Information technologies, with computers, networks, satellites, multimedia and the Internet, have revolutionised communication, which, in turn, has

led to an increased interaction on a global scale. Much of everyday interhuman interaction has shifted into cyberspace, leading to the proliferation of virtual communities. The term virtual communities is used to refer to dynamic collectivities of individuals constructed around various types of CMC, where individuals are bound by common interests rather than the shared geographical location (e.g. Rheingold 2000; Smith 1995). For one thing, virtual communities have the capacity to unite dispersed individuals in the fragmented world and bring revival of "true" community by strengthening social bonds globally and reversing the processes of social atomisation. For another, these new collectivities offer new opportunities for surveillance and control, which results from an uneven distribution of power in the Internet, not such an egalitarian medium as its enthusiasts initially thought (see also Kollock and Smith 1999).

The transformation of societies is also accompanied by the restructuring of contemporary institutions, which also carries major implications for identity construction by individuals. Contemporary institutions, including academic ones, are characterised by a new dynamics, in which social relations are "uprooted" from local contexts and moved into more global frameworks. This phenomenon intensifies the processes of reorganisation of time and space, necessitates the re-ordering of social relations on a global scale, and increases the mobility of contemporary institutions (Giddens 2001, 28–37). This, in turn, results in the lack of stability of contemporary institutions and threatens their identity and authority.

In view of the above changes it seems certain that there is a need for new identification of community and an institution, but more essentially of an individual, an analogue individual whose way of thinking and perception of the world and culture have been transformed as a result of "digitalisation". It appears compelling to investigate to what extent this new identification is present in electronic discourse and what are its linguistic exponents. In this book, my major focus is an academic virtual identity. My purposes will be to identify linguistic means of academic self-presentation in electronic discourse and to find out how members of academia give their identity constructed online institutional validity. The discussion will be empirically supported by the research of identity construction in a scholarly electronic seminar (e-seminar) *Humanist.* The communicative situation of this asynchronous type of CMC provides a challenging context in which to investigate the linguistic means of academic self-presentation as it combines private, public and institutional aspects of identity.

In my discussion I will emphasise the relevance of the conflicting characteristics of the electronic medium which intensify the complex

interrelation between mass media, social structures and an individual (e.g. Goban-Klas 1999). I will argue that the construction of academic identity in electronic discourse is affected by such properties of the electronic medium as hybridity – related to the blurred boundaries between the public and the private, interactivity, flexibility, digitalisation and technological convergence.

The theoretical and methodological basis of my investigation is a discourse community approach to scholarly communication by Swales (1990) and the Hallidayan systemic-functional model of grammar. Swales' approach allows us to focus on shared communicative goals, norms and discursive practices as the factors that influence the negotiation of group and individual identity. Halliday's (1994) distinction between ideational, interpersonal and textual levels of language use is important because these three levels contribute towards discoursal construction of identity. My approach fits in within the current theorising of identity in linguistic research, where identity is viewed as a dynamic phenomenon, actively constructed in discourse (see overviews of discursive approaches to identity in e.g. Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Bucholtz and Hall 2005; De Fina et al 2006; Ivanič 1998).

As regards the terminology, despite the multiplicity of near-synonyms for *identity* and the imprecision of the term, in this book I will still adhere to its use. I will be using the term *identity* in the broad sense, recognising its multivariate and dynamic character. By *identity construction* I will be referring to identity work being accomplished in discourse. The term *construction* implies that identity work in discourse is a conscious activity on the part of an individual (see e.g. Joseph 2004a). Admitting that an individual's self-presentation in discourse is also largely subconscious, I have followed the use of this widely accepted term as it emphasises an individual's agency in identification processes.

The book is organised into four theoretical chapters (Chapters 1-4), in which I provide an overview of the most important issues that are relevant for identity research in general, and the analyses of identity construction in academic electronic discourse, in particular, and one empirical chapter (Chapter 5), which presents the analysis and findings based on the *Humanist* e-seminar. More specifically, the aim of Chapter 1, "Language, Community, Identity", is to provide a broad perspective on linguistic research of identity in general. I provide the arguments for the necessity of an interdisciplinary study of identity construction in linguistics. In relation to this, I discuss the contributions to identity research of such disciplines as social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology and communication studies. Following a social view of identity, I survey the linguistic

accounts of the communal aspects of identity construction and argue in favour of a discursive approach to identity. In Chapter 2, "Academic Identity in Speech and Writing", I focus on the studies of linguistic realisations of academic identity in the "traditional" media. My major aims are: to emphasise the interactional character of academic texts, and to provide an overview of frameworks that allow us to investigate interpersonal meanings in academic discourse. Chapter 3, "Electronic Discourse: Linguistic, Social and Technological Aspects", and Chapter 4, "Virtual Identities, Cyberspace and Academic Communication", introduce linguistic, social and technological aspects of CMC that are relevant for the research of identity construction in academic electronic discourse. In Chapter 3 I characterise electronic discourse as a new variety of language, distinct from speech and writing. I also present CMC as a new medium and discuss its defining properties. The aim of Chapter 4 is to discuss the concepts of *virtual identity* and *virtual community*: how they are theorised and empirically investigated. I will also talk about the changes that academic communication has undergone as a result of the development of CMC. Finally, Chapter 5 presents my research and analyses of the findings of identity construction in academic discourse on the basis of an Internet discussion group. Initial sections of Chapter 5 (5.1–5.4) present the research group, the *Humanist*, and the research material, i.e. the corpora of the postings contributed to the *Humanist* by its six active members. Then, in the subsequent sections of Chapter 5 I demonstrate how academic identity is constructed on three levels of discourse organisation: the features of lexico-grammar, textual macrostructures and genres.

Generally speaking, the results of my analysis reveal how important it is for scholars to maintain a legitimate identity in an e-seminar. Virtual academic identity as constructed in this context is as an extension of academic identity constructed in the real world. The new communicative medium seems to have extended the repertoire of effective means of self-promotion, and the presentation of academic achievements and expertise. These aspects have become important for academic interaction in today's world, which is characterised by such phenomena as the internationalisation and globalisation of scholarship, commodification of science and intensified competition.

The present book is based on my PhD dissertation, written under the supervision of Professor Anna Duszak, the University of Warsaw, and defended at the University of Szczecin, Poland, in March 2008.

CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY

The aim of the present chapter is to look at how linguistics, taking an interdisciplinary perspective, has tackled the complexity of identity construction. Given a social view of language, in order to fully account for how identity is discoursally constructed, linguistics has to be informed by other disciplines that focus on the interrelation between the individual, a social structure and language. These are mainly social disciplines that emphasize the role of language as an identification and classification factor, used to mark affiliations and non-alignments, construct social bonds and the sense of group identity, convey solidarity, loyalty or detachment, etc. Thus, I will look at the findings of social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology and communication studies, focusing on the concepts of social identity, social bond and group identity.

Then, I will proceed to an overview of linguistic frameworks that address the social context of language and explore discoursal construction of identities, frameworks that involve such notions as speech community, discourse community and discourse system, social network and small culture, community of practice and epistemic community, and face and face systems. What emerges from this overview is a domination of collective views of identity: an individual's identity is mainly theorised in relation to social structures and his/her social roles. My major focus will be on a discursive approach, the basis of which is the view of identity as a socially constructed phenomenon. I will speak in favour of the argument that identity is a discursive process, i.e. a public phenomenon which is dynamically and continuously negotiated in discourse. As my ultimate aim in this book is to investigate discoursal construction of identity in the Internet, which is considered to be a mass medium, I will also address a critical perspective for the analysis of identity construction in mass media discourse.

1.1. The social foundations of language and identity:
an interdisciplinary perspective

The understanding we have of others and ourselves as persons is largely constructed through diverse linguistic practices we engage in. Languages have developed a range of resources (linguistic varieties, mechanisms and strategies) for handling social relationships and thus can be used to identify the social structure of a given collectivity (e.g. Crystal 1998; Foley 1997; Tabouret-Keller 1998). In other words, "there is an indexical correlation between the social context of a given linguistic interaction and the linguistic forms (…): the variables of social stratification are given concrete expression in the linguistic choices of actors" (Foley 1997, 313). This role of language as an identification and classification factor has also been addressed in other fields of study that take into focus the individual, society and culture, such as social psychology, sociology, anthropology and communication studies.

When discussing the conceptions of identity rooted in social relationships, it is necessary to point to the variability in conceptual meanings of the notions of *identity*, *self* and *person* in these fields of study. This variability has been numerously addressed in the literature of the subject (see e.g. Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Ivanič 1998; Joseph 2004a, 2004b; Kopytko 2002, 2003; Stryker and Burke 2000) and the disentangling of the complexity of the terminological problem is beyond the scope of my present discussion. However, in this section I would like to focus on those aspects of personhood and self-concept that I find directly relevant for the linguistic discussion of identity construction, especially in electronic discourse.

The near-synonyms for identity reveal some dualism in how identity has been conceptualised: identity understood as a cognitive or psychic phenomenon, and identity viewed as a public phenomenon interpreted by people in social interaction (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 3–4; see also Ivanič 1998; De Fina et al 2006). For instance, in her overview of the terms synonymous with identity, Ivanič lists such alternative notions as *self* and *ethos* that emphasise the private, individual aspect of identity, whereas *person*, *persona* or *role* refer to the public, institutional aspect of identity (1998, 10). Ivanič also recounts the terms *subject*, *subject position* and *positioning* that may additionally indicate a deterministic effect of social practices upon peoples' identities.

In social psychology, a well-established concept related to the social presentation of an individual is that of social identity, fundamental to social interaction. In most theoretical conceptions of social identity, the

main research interests lie in the forms of social identity that derive from individuals' real affiliations to social groups and categories. Thus, social identities emerge as the identities attributed to others in an attempt to situate them in social space (Snow 2001). They may be grounded in established social roles (e.g. teacher, mother), or in more inclusive social categories (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality) and thus are often referred to as "role identities" (Snow 2001 following Stryker 1980).

The construction of social identity is related to the formation of the sense of "We" that links an individual's self with others (even with the unknown others), despite the lack of direct experience (Grzelak and Jarymowicz 2000). The establishment of the mental construct "We" is ensued by the development of other forms of identification with others, such as the sense of social bond and community, or willingness to cooperate. Social identity may also be based on the symbolic affiliation to a social group: "We" may relate to a social group which we would like to belong to. Moreover, the formation of the so-called "abstract We" comes from the direct identification not with other individuals but their shared beliefs, values or goals. Consequently, social identity is shaped regardless of any real or symbolic membership in a social group.

In relation to the contribution of social psychology towards the explorations of identity in linguistics (a contribution which, according to Giles 1979, is, though, insufficient), two major approaches become available: Tajfel's theory of social identity and intergroup relations and Giles' accommodation theory (see e.g. Edwards 1985 for sociolinguistic explorations on ethnic identity, and Fasold 1984 for sociolinguistic studies of code-switching). Both theories attempt to examine the mechanisms responsible for group vitality.

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT), later adopted by Turner in his Self-categorisation Theory (SCT), is considered to be one of the most influential theories of social identity (see e.g. Grzelak and Jarymowicz 2000). According to Tajfel, social identity is part of an individual's self-concept that derives from his/her membership in a given social category, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership, shared with other members of this category. In Turner's SCT, social identity is defined as social categorization of the self based on the interpersonal similarities and differences stemming from group affiliation. In addition, Tajfel proposes a number of strategies that are available to members of groups in contact to enhance their positive identity (e.g. change of group, redefinition of negative qualities, creation of new evaluative dimensions). Similarly, speech accommodation, developed

by Giles and others, focuses on identity adjustments that are made to increase group status and favourability (Edwards 1985, 150–154).

The interest of sociology in the processes of social identification and the question of how membership in particular social categories moulds the self has centred around the responsibility of social roles and identities for the definition, meaning and social perception of the self (see e.g. Ivanič 1998; Kopytko 2002, 2003; Sztompka 2002 for extensive overviews). Likewise, recognizing social behaviour as a necessary condition for the development of the self and its relevance for social categorisation, social psychologists have developed models of the interpersonally determined self, stressing the role of communication (symbolic interaction) in the relationship between the self and society (e.g. Mead 1975; Tanno and Gonzales 1998; Griffin 2002), the establishment (or breakdown) and maintenance of social relationships (e.g. Argyle and Kendon 1967; Argyle 2002), or the processes of group formation (e.g. Mika 1981; see also Kopytko 2002 for an overview).

As products of categorization processes, social identities attempt to reflect the increasing complexity of modern social life. Snow (2001) considers this a kind of sociological truism that the issue of identity in the postmodern era becomes more problematic and unsettled as societies become more structurally differentiated, fragmented and culturally pluralistic (a problem also recorded in e.g. Castells 1997; Giddens 2001; Graddol 1997). Still, the so-called phenomenon of simultaneous participation is a natural feature of a human society (Sztompka 2002, 190). Multiple membership in social groups, deriving from the multiplicity of roles performed, mirrors the plurality of everyday human activity. Each individual typically functions in multiple, often conflicting roles because of different social contexts and fields of interaction, and because of a variety of needs that need to be satisfied. What is important is that, nowadays, individuals have gained a bigger freedom of choices as regards their group affiliations. In addition, different conventions for interactions and expectations are ascribed to different social roles. Roles also vary in the extent to which they are rigid or negotiable, and in the overall effect they have on an individual's life. It might be argued that highly pervasive roles are likely to become central definitional aspects of a person's identity (Foley 1997). Another problem relevant for the conceptualisations of social divisions is posed by the complex and ambivalent nature of demarcation processes. "Identitarian ambivalence may result from contradictory socialization or adaptation to, and use of, multiple positions (e.g. code switching)" (Duszak 2002a, 3). Moreover, "it is generally assumed that group boundaries are fuzzy rather than discreet, that they

form a continuum of ingroupness-outgroupness rather than a combination of disparate or partly overlapping constructs" (Duszak 2002 *op cit*). As a result, social identities emerge as complex, indeterminate and dynamic constructs, the elements of which become invoked or avowed depending on their situational relevance and their relative importance in relation to other identities (see also Snow 2001; Sztompka 2002; Tabouret-Keller 1998).

Other two terms that are relevant for the discussion of social identities are the *social bond* and *group* or *collective identity*. As it has been mentioned above, the way people construct and manage social identities is related to the processes of group building and bonding. In sociology and social psychology, a social bond is considered to be a basic determinant of social life: constructing and maintaining social bonds is one of the main aims of social behaviour (see e.g. Jacher 1987; Kerrick et al 2002; Kosiński 1987; Szczepański 1963; Sztompka 2002). Through bonding with others, people satisfy their basic social needs such as their sense of belonging, to open up a way to the realisation of other purposes: performing tasks, pursuing interests, or deriving material benefits. In addition, social bonds play a substantial role in helping to understand ourselves and others, winning and maintaining a position, keeping partners and allies, or boosting one's self-esteem (Kerrick et al 2002). As a central social category, a social bond is used to explain the existence, durability and functioning of social structures and processes: it is indexical of a social structure whose cohesion it ensures (Jacher 1987, 7).

A social bond is a multifold construct, the components of which attract varying research interests that attempt to grasp its nature. For example Kosiński (1987, 118–119) distinguishes 2 sets of components of a social bond: (1) spontaneous-subjective, related to the phenomena of the individual's identification with a social structure (of interest to social psychology); (2) formal-objective, including organizational aspects of a social bond (of interest to sociology). Kosiński also argues that a social bond is a dynamic phenomenon of varying intensity and duration that must include at least one of the following ten possible components (see also Szczepański 1963): (1) spatial contact, (2) psychic contact, (3) social contact, (4) interaction, (5) social activity, (6) social relations, (7) social dependencies, (8) social institutions, (9) social control and (10) social organization. The particular components of a social bond correspond to the subsequent stages of its development, pointing to the gradational nature of social bonds.

The gradation of a social bond, and, consequently, of human groupings, is also emphasized in Sztompka's typology of social bonds (Sztompka

2002, 182–192). Depending on the degree of its development, Sztompka differentiates the following types of a social bond: *objective, subjective, behavioural* and *co-operational*. The *objective bond* refers to the sense of community deriving from the similarity of a life situation, determined by such external factors as gender, age, race, citizenship, place of living, etc. (Sztompka 2002, 184). The next stage in the advancement of a social bond is the *subjective bond* marked by the emergence of collective identity: the basic sense of community becomes strengthened by members' identification with a grouping, revealed in a shared sense of "we-ness". Finally, the *behavioural bond* is identified by the sense of community expressed through common activity, whereas the co-operational bond relates to members' mutual indispensability in pursuing individual and collective goals.

The subsequent stages of bond building correspond to particular phases of group crystallization, resulting in the gradational nature of group divisions (see e.g. Kerrick et al 2002; Sztompka 2002). However, as Sztompka (2002, 194–196) notices, in reality there are frequent deviations from the complete schema of group formation. Not always is a social group characterized by the presence of objective and subjective bonds, the conscious realization of the sense of identity, and dense contacts or interactions. What is particularly pertinent to the discussion of virtual communities, the cohesion of a group may also grow from the imagined sense of community and identity, without any similarity of interests or sameness of any objective factors (see reference to *imagined communities* in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1).

As it has been already mentioned, the processes of group building and bonding are related to the development of collective identity. Every group of interacting individuals is considered to possess symbols, slogans, values, objects, etc. that are necessary for group members to develop the sense of community and belonging to their group (e.g. Szczepański 1963). The emergence of the shared sense of "we-ness" is only a partial reflection of the growing social bond. According to Snow (2001), conceptually, the essence of collective identity dwells also in the so-called "collective agency", i.e. the action component of collective identity. More specifically, the collective agency indicates the possibility of collective action in pursuing shared interests, and even encouraging such action. Therefore, Snow emphasizes the multidimensional, dynamic and evolving nature of collective identity. Differentiating the concept of collective identity from personal and social identity, Snow argues that "collective identities tend to be more fluid, tentative, and transient than categorically based social identities" (2001). Also, collective identity is marked by the generation

and maintenance of symbolic resources that strengthen group solidarity and function as boundary markers of distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

The social view of identity is also emphasised in anthropological research. To present the anthropological foundations of the dependency of the social presentation of the *person*[1] upon the establishment of social relationships and structures, Foley adduces Gergen's view of social functioning (Gergen 1990). According to Gergen, "the individual's well-being cannot be extricated from the web of relationships in which he/she is engaged", where "forms of relationships depend on the mutual coordination of actions" among interactants (quoted in Foley 1997, 262). Consequently, the person appears as "a lived history of structural couplings", bringing to each interaction the various patterns of relationships that they have been engaged in, as well as the social status that has been established in the previous encounters with others. A public social presentation of the person, in turn, will be contingent on their social status, their membership in social groups and the variety of social roles they perform.

Still, Foley (1997) also records some of the cross-cultural differences in the conceptualisation of personhood, revealed in a dichotomy of local beliefs between sociocentric and egocentric understanding of the person. Personhood defined in sociocentric terms, according to the social position a particular individual occupies, is common in cultures that do not single out the individual and his/her autonomy as the local understanding of a person. "The sociocentric conception of personhood regards the good of the social grouping as fundamental and subordinates individual wants and needs to the collective good" (Foley 1997, 266). In contrast, in the egocentric individualist ideology individuals themselves are more important than any constituent social grouping. Thus, a person is viewed as "an individual, an embodiment of absolute value in her own right, and not simply in terms of her position in any social pattern" (Foley 1997, 265).

Judgments about others as well as the classification of individuals into social categories are invariably based on sets of linguistic and non-linguistic criteria, which also vary cross-culturally. The non-linguistic parameters of social categorization include relatively permanent physical and psychological aspects of an individual's identity (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity), or relate to people's professional and economic status (e.g.

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[1] The notion of *person* as understood in anthropology is "a social concept made of local notions of one's rights and obligations", which varies cross-culturally. The notion of *person* is contrasted with the notion of *self* referring to "a proposed universal human awareness of one's own individual embodiment" (see Foley 1997, 262–263).

educational qualifications, occupation, income, their style of living). The evaluations of a person's social position according to the latter group of non-linguistic parameters are frequently just subjective judgments. People's attitudes and practices related to the processes of social categorization are inculcated through the various processes of socialization (see e.g. Foley 1997).

Finally, taking the perspective of communication studies, the accent is placed on the multiple communicative and identifying roles of the linguistic code, in a wider perspective of the multifunctionality of the process of communication (see e.g. Goban-Klas 1999). The knowledge of the phenomena that influence interpersonal communication may contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms that shape human social behaviour and, subsequently, will give a deeper insight into the processes of group building and bonding. In relation to the context of CMC, it is also relevant to mention the complex role of mass communication in bond building (Goban-Klas 1999). Admittedly, mass communication enriches the social landscape, but contributes to the mediation of social relations, which grow more distant, impersonal and weaker (Goban-Klas 1999, 114–116). Thus, on the one hand, mass communication conduces to the consolidation of dispersed individuals and generates the formation of new social structures. On the other hand, it leads to greater social mobility, atomisation of society and weakening of social ties and traditional communities.

1.2. Community-based approaches to identity

Modern linguistics, under the influence of related fields of social psychology, sociology, ethnography of speaking and cultural anthropology, has used a variety of approaches and methodologies to address the social context of language and explore the construction of social identities. In the 1960s, in his discussion of sociological linguistics, J. R. Firth recognized the significance of contextual analysis that makes allowance both for the situational and social context of language use (Firth 1964, 66). As people progressively become incorporated into the social organization, they accumulate a number of social roles that impose appropriate rules of linguistic behaviour under specific circumstances. Therefore, an efficient linguistic analysis must be concerned with the relation between the community's language and its social structure. A similar view appears in other works within the ethnography of speaking (e.g. Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Hymes 1964a, 1964b, 1968, 1974), and in Gumperz's works in cultural anthropology (e.g. 1971a, 1971c, 1974).

An important contribution of ethnographic research to the studies of language in its social context is the introduction of the notion of communicative competence. Hymes subordinates Chomsky's linguistic competence to communicative competence, arguing that effective communication in language involves not only the knowledge of language code, but also social and cultural knowledge of what to say and to whom, depending on a given situation, and speakers' ability to appropriately interpret linguistic forms.

Being concerned with how social information is encoded linguistically, Gumperz (1971a, 1971c, 1974) and Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) address some sociolinguistic problems of interpersonal and intergroup communication, focusing on face-to-face interaction. First of all, they recognize the complexity of the communicative environment, both at the level of everyday interpersonal interaction and intergroup communication across society. In modern, constantly changing societies, group membership, ethnic identity, communicative contexts and settings are rarely clearly definable (Gumperz 1974, 7). Moreover, since the study of sociolinguistic phenomena in relation to existing groups, institutions and settings cannot give a full account of everyday behaviour, Gumperz argues against the reliance on a priori social categories. Sociolinguistics needs analytical models that would consolidate the study of how individuals use their lexical, grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge to interact appropriately in various social contexts. This argument is repeated in Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982). In addition, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz argue that the boundaries within which people's social identities are negotiated are dynamic, communicatively constructed parameters, such as those provided by gender, ethnicity and class. Given this, to fully appreciate the mechanisms of identity construction and maintenance, it is necessary to gain insight into the communicative processes by which social, political, and ethnic divisions arise (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz1982, 1).

1.2.1. Speech communities

The essential concept for the link between language and social structure is that of a *speech community* (SpCom), whose origins are grounded in the general sources of sociolinguistics: historical linguistics, philosophy of language, dialectology, anthropology and early structuralism. This much defined and discussed unit of empirical linguistics has been used in the research of social groups and sub-groups of various kinds: urban and rural, large and small, specific and temporal, geographically-

bounded and of groups that cut across geographic lines, or groups not defined in linguistic terms (for an extensive review see Patrick 2002). As the study of the numerous conceptualisations of a SpCom also reveals much divergence, Patrick notes "a general lack of analysis and synthesis concerning the SpCom" (Patrick 2002, 575). The disparities revolve around such aspects of a SpCom as group boundaries, group membership and group homogeneity vs. heterogeneity. Additionally, it is unclear whether a SpCom is a primarily social or linguistic object.

In Chomsky's (1965) conception of a completely homogenous SpCom, group membership (of ideal speakers-listeners) is contingent on a shared access to a code (linguistic competence). Shared linguistic knowledge becomes the only criterion of social inclusion and exclusion. However, Chomsky's idealization of a uniform community does not relate to what can be observed in actual communities, i.e. the prevailing bi- or multilingualism (Gumperz 1982, 19).

For Hymes, a SpCom is a unit of taxonomy of sociolinguistic situations: thus, a social rather than linguistic entity (Hymes 1964, 1974). He argues that the definition of a SpCom in terms of shared linguistic features is inadequate to the external and internal bounding of communities. Besides, a "primary focus on a single language or grammatical code tends to make variation seem peripheral or intrusive" (Hymes 1964, 386). This recognition of variation among speech habits reflects the increased concern of linguistic anthropology for the complexity of the social structure. Hymes extends the criteria of social membership in a SpCom: apart form sharing linguistic form, legitimate members of a SpCom must competently exploit the knowledge of the rules and norms governing their communicative practices (communicative competence). Thus, the leading themes in Hymes' conceptualisation of a SpCom are: (1) boundaries, (2) co-variation among linguistic and social features (Hymes 1964, 388), and (3) membership in a SpCom as different from mere participation (Hymes 1974, 51). Still, Hymes does not expand on the issue of group membership, arguing that its complexity requires the contribution of social science.

Initially, Gumperz defined speech communities in terms of linguistic communities which were purely social concepts. A linguistic community was a mono- or multilingual structure, whose members were united by their "frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication" (1971a, 101). As regards the size and range, linguistic communities could be small groups constructed on the basis of face-to-face contact, or they could spread across larger regions. Subsequently, in his more restricted

definition of a SpCom, Gumperz stresses a shared linguistic knowledge as an essential criterion of a SpCom (1971b, 114). Moreover, he argues that regardless of the linguistic differences among them, speech varieties within a SpCom are systematic, as they reflect a shared set of social norms. Speech varieties serve as indices of social patterns of interaction in a SpCom, reflecting functionally related social roles (Gumperz 1971b, 116). Lastly, in his later conceptualisation of a SpCom, Gumperz questions speech communities being defined as functionally integrated systems with shared norms of evaluation, because this definition does not recognize social variability as an inherent property of linguistic systems (Gumperz 1982, 26). Therefore, a SpCom comes to be defined in functionalist terms as "a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations…. This variation shows systematic regularities at the statistical level of social facts (Gumperz 1982, 24).

The criticism of the models of a SpCom outlined above resulted in numerous elaborations and refinements of the notion (see e.g. Halliday 1978; Montgomery 1986; Patrick 2002; Romaine 2000/1994; Saville-Troike 1989). Halliday (1978) notices that a SpCom is a general label that might be applied to almost any aggregate of people. In its idealized sense (i.e. a linguistically homogenous group sharing reactions and attitudes to language, linked by some form of social organization), a SpCom is a construct to which human groups can only approximate (Halliday 1978, 154). The classical model of a SpCom proves to work reasonably well in rural contexts, whereas it begins to collapse when applied in urban situations of extensive linguistic diversity among and within individuals.

Montgomery (1986), in turn, observes that the conditions for an idealised SpCom are rarely simultaneously fulfilled. Secondly, part of the difficulty with the notion of a SpCom lies in the internal differentiation of human communities: material, cultural, political, by employment, occupation, gender, age, etc (Montgomery 1986, 134–135). As it is difficult to disentangle linguistic practices from the wider social processes in which they are embedded, the term SpCom should be concerned not only with the shared verbal practices, "but also with tension and conflict between them" (Montgomery 1986, 135).

In her discussion of a SpCom, Saville-Troike (1989) primarily addresses the distinction between participation and membership in a SpCom, arguing that membership cannot be based solely on sharing linguistic knowledge and skills. The focus in initially defining communities for study may also be placed on non-linguistic criteria, such as common geographical and political boundaries, culture traits or physical characteristics (Saville-Troike 1989, 17). Recognising the natural

heterogeneity of human communities and the complexities of social settings, Saville-Troike speaks in favour of the concept of a SpCom that would make allowance for primary and secondary memberships, and for multiple and overlapping memberships in social structures. This conception, which makes possible the integration of complex patterns of membership, proves particularly relevant for the study of contemporary technologically mediated social relations and structures. Finally, with reference to the problem of boundary marking by means of language, Saville-Troike distinguishes between "hard-shelled" and "soft-shelled" speech communities (Saville-Troike 1989, 19). The "hard-shelled" communities have stronger boundaries that limit interaction between in-group and out-group members, and provide maximum maintenance of language and culture. In contrast, the "soft-shelled" communities allow a relatively easy two-way interaction across the community's boundaries.

The synthesis of Gumperz's and Hymes' approaches appears in Romaine's definition of a SpCom: "a speech community is not necessarily coextensive with a language community. A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for the use of language. The boundaries between speech communities are essentially social rather than linguistic" (Romaine 2000/1994, 23). When focusing on membership in a SpCom, Romaine adduces the Prague School's distinction between *speech bond* and *language bond* (*Sprechbund* vs. *Sprachbund*). Shared ways of speaking frequently go beyond language boundaries; thus, membership in a community is determined in terms of interactional rather than language norms (i.e. through communicative competence).

To conclude, the multitude of conceptualisations and re-evaluations of a SpCom reveals much divergence and disagreement among researchers, which contributes to the concept's vagueness and deficiency. Admittedly, a SpCom was for long considered a basic defining factor of language (Duszak 2001) and a socially-grounded unit of linguistic analyses (Patrick 2002). However, some dilemmas still remain unsolved, such as the differentiation of linguistic competence of a SpCom, its internal heterogeneity of language, and an individual's participation in multiple speech communities (Duszak 2001, 8). The adequacy of the notion of a SpCom has been numerously challenged or rejected, giving way for alternative conceptualisations of the relationship between language use and social structures. These conceptualisations attempt to better account for the complexity and dynamics of the contemporary social reality of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contacts, continuously enhanced by the ongoing development of communication media.

1.2.2. Discourse communities and discourse systems

One of the major concepts that developed as a reinterpretation of a SpCom and *interpretative community*[2] is a *discourse community*. Although much contested (e.g. Borg 2003; Duszak 1998a; Johns 1997), the concept of the discourse community has proved particularly useful in research on specialist discourse (for academic discourse analysis see e.g. Duszak 1997b; Valle 1994), the study of writing in academic contexts and writing for specific purposes (Bhatia 1993; Connor 1996; Duszak 1998b), organizational communication (Orlikowski and Yates 1994), genre (Bhatia 1993) and cybergenre theory (Berquist and Ljungberg 1999; Erickson 1997; 1999; Shepherd and Watters 1999; Sokół 2004; Yates and Sumner 1997).

An influential definition of a discourse community belongs to John Swales (1990), who grounded his conception on the analyses of English academic texts. Swales distinguishes six defining characteristics of a discourse community: (1) a set of common public goals, (2) mechanisms of intercommunication among its members, (3) the use of participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback, (4) shared genres, (5) shared lexis, and (6) a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise (1990, 24–27). Thus, the emphasis is placed on genres and lexis as elements that enable a discourse community's members to maintain their goals, regulate their membership, and communicate efficiently with one another. In Swales' original conception, a discourse community is united by written communication. After the reconsideration of this issue, Swales differentiates between discourse communities and "place discourse communities" which were united by both written and spoken communication (Swales 1998).

As regards the distinction between speech communities and discourse communities, the main advantage of a discourse community approach in Swales' view is its sociorhetorical perspective of analysis. Unlike a speech community, the term discourse community focuses on functional rather than social determinants of the linguistic behaviour of individuals. In terms of the structure of society, speech communities are centripetal, i.e. inclusive, while discourse communities are centrifugal: they tend to separate people into occupational or speciality-interest groups. A point raised in relation to the patterns of members' recruitment is that membership in a speech community is typically inherited by birth, accident or adoption, whereas in a discourse community – by persuasion,

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[2] According to Stanley Fish (1980), an *interpretative community* is an open network of people who share ways of reading texts.

training or relevant qualification (Swales 1990, 24). Lastly, it is not easy to demarcate between sociolinguistic and sociorhetorical aspects of human communication skills, hence the border between speech and discourse communities runs on fuzzy grounds (Duszak 1998a, 254).

Another vital element of a discourse community approach is its recognition of gradable and multiple membership. Swales notes that discourse communities have changing memberships, and that the survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between novices and experts (Swales 1990, 27). The differentiation between experts and novices implies the gradational nature of members' specialist, textual and communicative competence. Full membership in a discourse community is marked by intensive communicative activity. Multiple membership in discourse communities, in turn, is a reflection of the multiplicity of social roles and identities that individuals adopt in their social life. Each role/identity involves the voluntary and conscious activation of a specific communicative, interactional and textual competence under particular situational, social and communicative circumstances. This suggests that people's social identities, as well as their memberships in discourse communities, are dynamic and undergo constant revisions and modifications.

Finally, the advantage of the concept of the discourse community is that it does not presuppose a reference to one language, just as speech communities do (Duszak 2001, 10). Since an index of membership in a discourse community is the competent use of established genres and compliance with the community's communicative norms, a member's initiation into other types of discourse competence remains of secondary importance. Discourse communities are constructed within and across speech communities, independently of the members' native language. Another important consequence of such global distribution of discourse communities is their freedom from territorial bounds. This element of the concept of the discourse community makes it an attractive tool for research into CMC-based social structures.

Still, despite its wide application, the concept of the discourse community is considered to be abstract (Johns 1997) and fuzzy (Duszak 1998a; Erickson 1997, 1999; Swales 1990), and some of its elements as imprecisely defined (Borg 2003). Johns, concerned with issues of academic literacies, expresses the necessity to specify the relationship between discourse communities and their genres and the mechanisms that make communities complex and varied. In addition, she inquires about the existence of levels of discourse communities: e.g. "can we hypothesize a general academic community or language?" (Johns 1997, 51). Given the