



Book Review

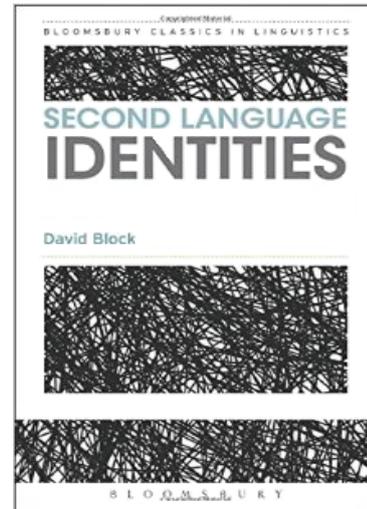
Second Language Identities

by David Block

London: Continuum (2007, 2009)

London: Bloomsbury (2014)

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Over the last decade an increasing amount of the research on study abroad has hinged upon the issue of identity. As people switch languages, to what extent do they also switch identity positions? What factors prompt bilingual and multilingual individuals to interface with their environments through different languages and registers? In the process, how do their personal narratives change? This 230-page book explores these and many other questions. Although this text is not exclusively about study abroad, much of it is relevant to those hoping to understand the ways language learning in overseas contexts shapes our notions of who we are, how we are perceived, and how we interact with others.

This work is arranged in seven chapters. This review focuses on three aspects of this text that are most relevant to readers of this journal.

(1) *Post-Modern Notions of Identity*

Although much of Block's writing is in a post-modern spirit, he is not adverse to examining ways that identity tends to be categorized. Mentioning how identity is often indexed along ethnic, racial, national, migratory, gender, social class, and linguistic lines, Block points out that “[these] are about positioning by others and self-positioning, ascriptions from without and affiliations from within” (p. 50). He further states that since identity is co-constructed, it is “simultaneously individual and collective in nature” (p. 50). Moreover, the author notes that while most researchers have studied one or perhaps two identity categories, multiple identity issues generally come into play. Hence Block stresses the need to expand our indices of identity, examining categories such as consumer identity, religious identity, and multimodality, which includes identity with a physical location.

(2) *Identity in Study Abroad Contexts*

Chapter 6 of this text explores how study abroad sometimes impacts identity. The first half focuses on sexual harassment and gender-related subject positions. Research on sexual harassment experiences in Russia, Costa Rica, and Spain are introduced. Despite the harassment, the women in the first two countries were able to form positive relationships with other women or their host families (p.190). The person in Spain had a generally negative experience in large part due to racial prejudice. Commenting on the gendered subject positions of American women in Russia, Pellegrino (2005) reports how some informants felt that it was, “impossible to establish platonic relationships with Russian men [as] Russian men always had ‘unreasonable expectations’, wanting sex before all else” (p. 192). In their study of American students in France, Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth (2005) observe how French notions of femininity and masculinity impacted the students’

French language. One male informant was able to make far more progress than two female informants. However, none of them achieved the communicative levels that they had hoped for (p.198).

The second half of this chapter looks at teacher-student subject positions, enhanced national identity, and a case study in France (all involving Americans studying overseas) before considering the experiences of Europeans studying in other European countries and those of Japanese women learning English abroad. Based on these studies, Block surmises that “the [study abroad] experience can mean an enhanced affiliation to one’s inherited national identity as opposed to the development of greater intercultural sensitivity” (p. 207). However, Kinginger’s (2004) case study of an American woman in France shows that the student was able to “develop deep and meaningful social contacts with [target language] speakers” by enhancing her political awareness (p. 211). In contrast, a study by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) on ERASMUS programme participants indicates that Europeans seldom mention gender issues or come away with the sense of enhanced nationalism that Americans tend to. While the ERASMUS participants in Murphy-Lejeune’s study did appear to develop cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence, it is unclear whether these effects were lasting (p. 217). For Japanese women studying abroad, the studies cited by Block indicate that the women “adopt liberated gender subject positions linked to their sojourns away from Japan” (p. 221). The Japanese informants did not exhibit the enhanced nationalism that the American study abroad participants did, nor did they return with the same sense of intercultural awareness as most European ERASMUS participants.

(3) *Future Research Directions*

The book concludes with a final chapter suggesting five areas for future research. These are a greater emphasis on social class, a need to move away from an L1-L2 focus to a language-additional language focus, the emergence of local lingua francas, the effect of electronic-mediated communication on identity, and a psychoanalytic perspective. Block says, “This current interest in identity [as a key construct in research] in the social sciences in general, and applied linguistics in particular, looks likely to continue into the foreseeable future” (p. 242). As such, there is a need for research that “problematizes contexts [by] documenting the constellations of sociohistorical and sociocultural elements that form and define them” and “draws on multiple sources of data: interviews, diaries, recorded interactions and so on” (p. 243).

Some Pros and Cons

The main strength of this book is that it offers broad exposure to a variety of research that relates to the issues of identity in different contexts, and particularly for study abroad. It also provides a rich background from which to view and understand student experiences. I agree with Callahan (2009), who states, "*Second Language Identities* is to be recommended to graduate students and researchers who wish to acquaint themselves with seminal studies in the discipline of identity in SLL."

Perhaps the main weakness of this text is that Chapter 2 and especially Chapter 3, while interesting, cover so much material by so many researchers that it makes for occasionally dense and difficult reading. As Adcharawan (n.d.) states, “some readers might find some chapters somewhat technical: Active L2 researchers will appreciate the depth of this overview; yet other L2 professionals may not require such in-depth analysis.”

The Bottom Line

I concur with the assessments of Potowskia (2010), Broomhead (2013), and Estrada (2010) that this book is worth reading. Moreover, this book has had a significant impact on many subsequent identity-related linguistic studies. It also portends many of the current directions in the fields of socio-linguistics, second language learning, and psycholinguistics. Since much of this work was written nearly a decade ago, I hope some parts of it will be updated to reflect recent research in the field of language identity, which is flourishing.

- Reviewed by Karen Yabuno

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