

A Discursive Approach to Identity Deconstruction and Reconstruction—With a Particular Reference to Literary Texts*

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It has been long held that one's identity is a predetermined category without any likelihood to change. However, this is not the case. Adopting the discursive approach and drawing on the postmodern deconstruction theory as the theoretical framework, the current paper testifies that far from being a static entity, the identity, as a dynamic product of deconstruction and reconstruction, is always on the change. In the process of verbal communication, interlocutors are always deconstructing and reconstructing identities in accordance with the ever-changing situations. With literary texts as particular examples, this paper reveals that identity is at the same time the object of real-time discursive deconstruction and the product of real-time discursive reconstruction. It is concluded that the process of verbal communication is as a matter of fact an alternation between identity deconstruction and identity reconstruction.

Keywords: identity, deconstruction, reconstruction, discursive approach

Introduction

"I used to be reluctant to answer the question 'Who are you?'" The program which was popular at the Spring Festival Entertainment Spree moved millions of Chinese audience to tears because it aroused the public concern about the educational issue of the migrant children who move to cities with their migrant parents. The reason why it could be so sensational among the general public lies in the fact that it wakened people's attention not only to the underprivileged but also to the issue which has been ignored for a long time, identity—to be specific, the identity of migrant children in this program.

The present paper first discusses the definition of identity, then moves on to an analysis of the issues relevant to discourse analysis and summarizes the key factors in discourse which contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of one's identity. Afterwards, based on these factors of discourse, the paper will explore the role played by discourse in the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity with a particular reference to literary texts.

Relevant Studies on Identity

Identity is a topic both old and new. It is old in that Confucius's teachings such as "Let the ruler be ruler,

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ministers ministers, fathers fathers, sons sons” (Book XII, Analects) more than 2,000 years ago and Buddhists’ reflections on the origin as well as the ultimate destination of human beings are both thoughts on identity. It is young in that it did not come into the limelight until very recently when identity fraud and identity theft have become everyday topics of public concern. Nowadays, in the epoch of information explosion and fissure with the tradition, identity subjectivity has been almost completely deprived, thus leading to the loss and perplexity over personal identity (GU & LI, 2007). Against the backdrop, identity has become an increasingly prominent topic in academic circles.

Although identity has been touched upon in ancient literature, there still has been no general consensus with regard to its definition. So far, it has two diametrically opposed definitions: interior identity and exterior identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The former holds that a person’s identity is intrinsic and unchangeable, underlying his or her different performances in different contexts. In contrast, the latter holds that a person’s identity is determined by external factors, and is subject to people’s interpretations and comments. A person can take on, assign, and reject an identity.

Due to the incessant fluidity of world affairs, identity is also in a state of mobility and uncertainty. Therefore, it is impossible for a person to possess an unchangeable identity. As a matter of fact, a person’s identity is always on the change and it is the product of dynamic deconstruction and reconstruction by means of various linguistic devices. The moment when a new identity is constructed witnesses the old identity being disintegrated. The reconstruction of the identity is not simply the replacement of an exterior identity with an interior one. On the contrary, the product of the reconstruction is the external expression of the inner self. The ascertainment, manipulation, and adjustment of interpersonal identities are all realized in and through discourse. On this ground, it is safe to say that identities manifest themselves clearly and entirely in discourse.

A Sketch of Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis has undergone more than 60 years of development since it was first put forward by Z. Harris (1952). Different approaches and methods to discourse analysis have been proposed, bringing about its rapid development (ZHU, 2003). In a narrower sense, discourse analysis can be divided into text analysis and conversation analysis, with the former represented by Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985) and the latter represented by Sidnell (2009). In a broader sense, discourse analysis involves six different theories, namely, speech act theory, sociolinguistics, ethnography, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis (Schiffrin, 1994).

Here sociolinguistics will be cited as an example to illustrate how its concepts can be applied to the analysis of discourse. Sociolinguistics distinguishes between dialects, regional varieties of, and the standard variety of a language, and puts forward the concepts such as code and code switching. According to William Labov (1966), a world renowned sociolinguist, a person’s social status can be correctly judged from his or her use of a particular variety of a language. He conducted a survey on the pronunciation of the word “floor” by customers to three department stores in New York. It was revealed that there is a clear difference in the pronunciation of the word in question between the customers of higher social status and those of lower social status: While the rich pronounced the retroflex [r] infallibly and unexceptionally, the poor usually failed to pronounce it. The result of this survey shows that people of different social status communicated in different codes.

Code, an important concept in sociolinguistics, refers to the symbolic system used by human beings in a

certain round of communication (Bernstein, 1971). So, it can be either a language or a particular variety of a language. According to their dependency on the context, codes are classified into restricted code and elaborated code, with the former hugely dependent on the context and the latter independent of the context. Different codes perform different functions and people can switch between their different codes to express their changing purposes. In essence, code switching is the concrete application of the discourse in a specific context. For this reason, the code switching between the dialects and the standard variety of a language can be utilized to the analysis of discourse and reveal the delicate changes in the speaker's identity.

By the same token, the other approaches listed above can also be applied to discourse analysis, thus contributing to an all-round analysis of a particular discourse.

Major Factors of Discourse

As the product of the gaming between the interlocutors in their conscious use of different linguistic devices, identity finds its real-time expression in discourse. Therefore, what factors are contained in discourse is of great importance. The key factors of discourse can be summarized as follows.

Pronunciation

The non-standard or substandard pronunciation often serves to construct a lower social status of a speaker with limited or no power over others, while the standard pronunciation serves to construct a speaker with a higher social status, a good education and a greater power over others.

Vocabulary

Since the same concept can be expressed with different words in different varieties of a language and these different words carry different connotations, the specific use of a particular word in discourse by a speaker serves to construct his or her attitude such as approval or disapproval towards the referent in question.

Modal Verbs

Modals verbs with high values usually show that the speaker has a higher social status, a more powerful position over the listener, while those with low values indicate that the speaker is of a lower social position.

Mood

A sentence in indicative mood shows that the information conveyed by the speaker is absolutely true and unquestionable, while a sentence in interrogative mood shows that the speaker is at a lower social status and is not sure about the truth of his or her message.

Code

The elaborated code reveals the user is of a higher social position, while the restricted code reveals that the user is of a lower social position.

Turn-Taking

Generally speaking, a person in authority has the right to assign turns to his inferiors, who in turn have no choice but to accept the assigned turns.

The Role of Discourse in the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Identity

Deconstruction, in literary criticism, refers to the process of negating the text with the help of the factors

contained within the same text (Culler, 2008). Here in the present paper, deconstruction refers to the disintegration of the original identity a person is in possession of. Two literary works, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1981), a novel by Thomas Hardy, and *Major Barbara* (1966), a play by Bernard Shaw, will be taken as examples to reveal the process of how discourse helps to deconstruct and reconstruct the identity a person has.

The Mayor of Casterbridge tells a story of how Henchard, a representative of the patriarchs in the traditional agricultural society, was defeated by Farfrae, a representative of the emerging capitalists. Since he was born of a poor farmer's family, Henchard spoke a regional variety of English at the beginning of the novel, which indicates he was still of a lower social status. What follows are two sentences extracted from what he said when he attempted to sell Susan, his wife. In the brackets are the page number and the chapter from which they are taken. The substandard linguistic forms have been underlined.

I'd challenge England to beat me in the fodder business; and if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done o't. (p. 6, ch. 1)

For my part I don't see why men who have got wives and don't want 'em, shouldn't get rid of 'em as these gypsy fellows do their old horses. Why shouldn't they put 'em up and sell 'em by auction to men who are in need of such articles? (pp. 6-7, ch. 1)

Twenty years later, when he delivered a speech at the King's Arm, a local hotel, as mayor of Casterbridge, he spoke an impeccably standard variety of English. Besides, he used the high-value modal verbs "must" twice. Furthermore, he even used the passive voice at the end of the sentence, which is rarely used in everyday communication. These features in combination show that he was using an elaborated code.

You must make allowances for the accidents of a large business. You must bear in mind that the weather just at the harvest of that corn was worse than we have known it for years.... When I've got him you will find these mistakes will no longer occur—matters will be better looked into. (p. 34, ch. 5)

When he was demoted from the post of mayor several years later and returned to work as a weeder, his speech retracted into its original restricted code.

A fellow of his age going to be Mayor, indeed! But 'tis her money that floats en upward. Ha-ha-how cust odd it is! Here be I, his former master, working for him as man, and he the man standing as master. (p. 223, ch. 32)

The same thing happened to Farfrae. On his first arrival to Casterbridge, his speech was full of Scottish accents, one of which is the frequent occurrences of the retroflex [r] in his speech. This serves to show that he was not well received by the urbanites.

It is true I am in the corren trade—but I have replied to no advairrtisment, and arrange to see no one. I am on my way to Bristol—from there to the other side of the warrrld, ... (p. 43, ch. 7)

However, after he defeated Henchard and ascended to the post of mayor, the marker of his Scottish origin, the retroflex [r], was nowhere to be found in his speech, as exemplified by his welcome address to the Royal family:

I hardly see that it would be proper, Mr. Henchard. The council are the council, and as ye are no longer one of the body there would be an irregularity in the proceeding. (p. 256, ch. 37)

These strikingly different linguistic forms which were used by both characters of the novel at their different

stages of life give a clear clue to their respective vicissitudes, hence contributing to the deconstruction of their original identities as well as the reconstruction of their new identities.

The role played by discourse in the dynamic construction of identity is marvelously exemplified by the code switching on the part of Henchard in the seventh and ninth chapters, in which he made greatest endeavors to persuade Farfrae to stay and help him survive the bad bread crisis. At first, he spoke as mayor in a haughty manner a standard version of English:

If you accept this place, you shall manage the corn branch entirely, and receive a commission in addition to salary. (p. 45, ch. 7)

But when he realized that Farfrae had no intention to stay and was determined to go abroad, he softened his tone and tried palling around with Farfrae.

Your forehead, Farfrae, is something like my poor brother's—now dead and gone; and the nose, too, isn't unlike his. (p. 45, ch. 7)

At last, he even stopped hanging on his mayor aura and gave up the elaborated code. Instead, he picked up his restricted code and made use of his dialectal terms:

If you bide and be my manager I will make it worth your while. (p. 46, ch. 7)

The purpose of his switching between different codes is undoubtedly to enhance his affinity with Farfrae and to remove the obstacles in the process of attaining the latter's help. Unfortunately, his efforts did not produce his expected result and Farfrae was not convinced to stay. In face of this, Henchard was not discouraged and begged Farfrae to have a short stay with him, which was also rejected. The second day, when Farfrae was planned to leave, he invited Farfrae to have a walk with him under the pretext of coincidence. On Farfrae's departure, he pleaded, once again and with the slightest hope, with Farfrae to stay.

Come bide with me—and name your own terms. I will agree to 'em willingly and 'ithout a word of gainsaying; for, hang it, Farfrae, I like thee well! (p. 60, ch. 9)

At this moment, his speech was full of regional accents. Especially mentionworthy is that he used the word “bide”, which is usually left to be used by the people of the lowest social status. In fact, he harbored a strong disgust towards the word, which is evidenced from his response to Elizabeth's use of “bide” in the 12th chapter.

Elizabeth: If you bide where you be a minute, father, I'll get it. (p. 126, ch. 20)

Henchard: Bide where you be! Good God, are you only fit to carry wash to a pig trough that ye use such words as those? (p. 126, ch. 20)

Here Henchard gave Elizabeth a severe reprimand just because Elizabeth had used the word “bide”, which he thought was only suitable for a person of the lowest social status. Therefore, the use of the word “bide” by Henchard himself is a clear indication that he had racked his brains and tried his best endeavors to align with Farfrae. This code switching finally achieved its desirable result and Farfrae agreed to stay for his rescue.

In short, Henchard utilized different discursive devices to deconstruct his original identity of the haughty mayor of Casterbridge and reconstructed an identity of a pitiful farmer which is similar to his addressee. Only by

this means did he achieve what he had expected.

The second literary work, *Major Barbara*, tells a story of redemption. The main characters include: Barbara, who used to be a major in British Salvation Army; her younger sister Sarah; her younger brother Stephen, a kind-hearted enthusiastic youth; their mother Lady Britomart, who is always well dressed but seems inattentive to clothes and who is well nurtured but seems not to care about nurturing; and their father Andrew Undershaft, an illegitimate son and an arms dealer, who lives by principles of moral integrity and believes in cannons and torpedoes. This play is of an intricate plot, a humorous language, and a complex cast who have different backgrounds (SUN, 2007).

The following dialogue is taken from the beginning of the play. An analysis of their turn taking reveals clearly the process of their identity construction.

Stephen (hereafter S): What's the matter?

Lady Britomart (hereafter LB): Presently, Stephen.

LB: Don't begin to read, Stephen. I shall require all your attention.

S: It was only while I was waiting.

LB: Don't make excuses, Stephen. Now! I have not kept you waiting very long, I think.

S: Not at all, mother.

LB: Bring me my cushion. Sit down. [He sits down and fingers his tie nervously.] Don't fiddle with your tie,

Stephen: there is nothing the matter with it.

S: I beg your pardon. [He fiddles with his watch chain instead.]

LB: Now are you attending to me, Stephen?

S: Of course, mother.

LB: No: it's not of course. I want something much more than your everyday matter-of-course attention. I am going to speak to you very seriously, Stephen. I wish you would let that chain alone. (Shaw, 1966, pp. 41-42)

Obviously, Lady Britomart, the mother, is always in charge of topic initiation and control, while her son Stephen has to accept her interrogation passively. In terms of turn length, the mother's turns on average are almost twice as long as Stephen's, with the longest move containing as many as 34 words. In addition, there is a serious unbalance between initiative moves and responsive moves. The mother is always initiating moves and the son has no choice but to accept them. In terms of move interruption, the mother always interrupts her son's moves where she should not interrupt, while the son never interrupts the mother's moves.

The above analysis indicates that the characters' identities can be constructed by means of a large variety of discursive devices. Here in this play, Lady Britomart is constructed as an overbearing and tyrannical mother, which is totally different from the image that the general public have of a mother.

Conclusion

Identity is one of the major concerns with the general public. This paper has addressed the issue of identity from the perspective of discourse. Based on a review on the existing literature both about identity and about discourse analysis, an analysis of two literary works has been conducted to reveal how discourse serves to deconstruct and reconstruct the characters' identities. This analysis contributes to the argument that identity is not a predetermined category but a product of deconstruction and reconstruction on the part of the speaker. A person can adjust or modify his or her identity for the achievement of his or her communicative purpose.

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