

**IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE
IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
IN AMERICAN MOVIES**

Nikolenko Andrew

Ph.D.

National University of Biological Resources of Ukraine

The article observes contemporary communication perspectives on identity, the labels that refer to particular identities through the intercultural communication, different types of identities unfolded in American movies and influence of identity on intercultural communication processes.

Key words: identity, communication perspectives, label, intercultural communication, American movie.

Identity serves as a bridge between culture and communication. It is important because we communicate our identity to others, and we learn who we are through communication [Tedeschi, Lindskold, Rosenfeld 1985; Rosenfeld, Ciaclone 1991]. It is through communication – with our family, friends, and others – that we come to understand ourselves and form our identity. Issues of identity are particularly important in intercultural interactions.

We can single out three contemporary communication perspectives on identity:

1. The social science perspective, based largely on research in psychology, views the self in a relatively static fashion in relation to the various cultural communities to which a person belongs: nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and so on [Erikson 1968; Kim 2002, 12; Roland 1988; Gao 1996, 84; Cross 2000; Tajfel 1981; Tajfel 1982; Ting-Toomey 1993; Ting-Toomey 2005].

2. The interpretive perspective is more dynamic and recognizes the important role of interaction with others as a factor in the development of the self [Collier, Thomas 1988]. Central to the interpretive perspective is the idea that our identities are expressed communicatively – in core symbols, labels, and norms. Core symbols (or cultural values) tell us about the fundamental beliefs and the central concepts that define a particular identity. Communication scholar Michael Hecht and his colleagues have identified the contrasting core symbols associated with various ethnic identities [Hecht 1998; Hecht, Jackson, Ribeau, 2003].

3. The critical perspective views identity even more dynamically – as a result of contexts quite distant from the individual. The relationship between identity and intercultural interaction involves both static and dynamic elements and both personal and contextual elements [Collier 2005; Lacan 1977; Sigelman, Tuch, Martin 2005].

The labels that refer to particular identities are an important part of intercultural communication. These labels do not, of course, exist outside of their relational meanings, cf:

Cristina Moreno: Working for Anglos now posed no problems. It would just be a job [Spanglish, 2004].

It is the relationships – not only interpersonal but social – that help us understand the importance of the labels [Tanno 2000]. Even more, such labels may lead to an intercultural conflict, as in:

Ivan: I give you ticket and you tell me Chili Palmer come to my store and I kill him. But nyet, no Chili come.

Sin LaSalle: Yo, Tolstoy, take a number.

Ivan: The cops come with ticket.

Ivan: Cops? What cops?

Sin LaSalle: Excuse me, Vladimir. I don't know about the Ukraine, but I was here first.

Ivan: Be cool, nigger.

Dabu: Nigger?

Ivan: Then game is over. No more setups. No more... nigger cops.

Sin LaSalle: Have you lost your mind? I mean, how is it that you can disrespect a man's ethnicity when you know we've influenced nearly every facet of white America? From our music to our style of dress, not to mention your basic imitation of our sense of cool. Walk, talk, dress, mannerisms. We enrich your very existence, all the while contributing to the gross national product through our achievements in corporate America. It's these conceits that comfort me when I'm faced with the ignorant, cowardly, bitter and bigoted, who have no talent, no guts, people like you who desecrate things they don't understand when the truth is you should say "Thank you, man" and go on about your way. But apparently you're incapable of doing that, so... (Sin LaSalle shoots Ivan) Racial epithets. Why does it always come down to that? Makes me sad for my daughter [Be cool 2005].

Like culture, labels also change over time. At one time, it was acceptable to use the label *oriental* to refer to people, but today the social meaning of that term is considered negative. There are many terms that you may not know are considered offensive, but as you interact with others around the world, you should be aware that you need to learn what terms to use and what terms to avoid. For example, some gays and lesbians do not like the term *queer*; others have embraced it. Cultures change over time, as do languages. It is important that you stay aware of these changes as much as possible so you do not unintentionally offend others.

In contemporary American movies we can also single out so called *gender identity*; Gender identity is vividly demonstrated by communication style [Bederman 1995, 15; Yamanouchi 2002, D1; Wood 2005]. For example, women's communication style is often described as supportive, egalitarian, personal, and disclosive, whereas men's is characterized as competitive and assertive [Wood 2005]. However, these differences may be more perception than fact because women's and men's communication styles are more similar than they are different [Canary, Hause 1993; Pennebaker, Mehl, Niederhoffer 2003]. And yet these stereotypes of gender differences persist, maybe partly because of the stereotypical depictions of men and women in magazines, on television, and in movies as in:

Vicky: Oh, God, look... I wouldn't call our reluctance to leap at your sexual offer being over-analytical. If you would care to join us for some recognized form of social interaction, like a drink, then we'd be fine, but otherwise, I think you should try, you know, offering to some other table.

Juan Antonio: What offended you about the offer? Surely not that I find you both beautiful and desirable? [Vicky Cristina Barcelona 2008].

Our *sexual identities* influence our consumption, which television shows we watch, which magazines we read, which Internet sites we visit (Foucault, 1988). Some assume a certain level of public knowledge about sexual identities or stereotypes; for example, Reality TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* [Queer Eye for the Straight Guy 2004] and TV Series *Will and Grace* [Will and Grace 1998–2004] assumed viewers were familiar with stereotypes of gays.

Different generations often have different philosophies, values, and ways of speaking [Strauss, Howe 1997], all that making up *age identity*. For example, data show that the millennium generation (or Gen Y, those born between 1982–2001) are more diverse and globally oriented and more knowledgeable about computers and technology than any preceding generation. They are also more optimistic, more committed to contributing to society and more interested in life balance between work and play than the previous, Gen X, group (those born between 1961–1981) [Strauss, Howe 2006]. This also is reflected in the way they learn and work (e.g., multitasking, use of multimedia, etc.).

As to *racial and ethnic Identities* in the United States today, the issues of race and *racial Identity* is both controversial and pervasive. It is the topic of many public discussions, from television talk shows to talk radio and often unfolded in movies as in:

Edy Rodriguez: I swear, I'm never betting with you again, Spencer. 30 years, you've never ponied up once. And why you bet on Trinidad, anyway?

Spencer: I usually never bet when two brothers are fighting.

Edy Rodriguez: Trinidad is Puerto Rican. How many times do I have to explain to you Puerto Ricans ain't black.

Spencer: Come on, you know damn well if Trinidad wasn't black, I'd never bet on him. I always bet on the black man. Lakers versus Celtics, I always went Lakers. Tiger versus the white boy of the month... I always go Tiger. The only time I ever lost was Apollo versus Rocky, but I think that shit was fixed. [Nothing Like the Holidays 2008]

Yet many people feel uncomfortable talking about it or think it should not be an issue in daily life [Hasian, Nakayama 1999; Omi, Winant 2001; Roediger 2005]. Terms like *mulatto* and *Black Irish* demonstrate cultural classifications; terms like *Caucasoid* and *Australoid* are examples of biological classification.

In contrast to racial identity, *ethnic identity* may be seen as a set of ideas about one's own ethnic group membership [Cornell, Hartmann 1998; Martin, Nakayama 2012, 185], as in:

Cristina Moreno: There is one particular cultural difference... which I wish to explore academically at Princeton. American women, I believe... actually feel the same as Hispanic women about weight. A desire for the comfort of fullness. And when that desire is suppressed for style... and deprivation allowed to rule... dieting, exercising American women...become afraid of everything associated with being curvaceous...such as wantonness, lustfulness...sex, food...motherhood. All that is best in life [Spanglish 2004].

A scene from romantic comedy *Something New* [Something New 2006] illustrates the lack of awareness of racial identity of many white people. Kenya, a high-profile financial broker is dating Brian, a white landscape designer. One evening while shopping for gro-

ceries together, Kenya tells Brian about yet another experience of racial prejudice in the all-white firm where she works. Brian asks her to "put the white boys on hold for a while"—saying that he had a rough day and wants to relax and not talk about race, that it makes him feel uncomfortable. Kenya reminds him:

Kenya: ... you don't have to talk about being white because no one reminds you everyday that you're white. The only time you guys know you're white is when you're in a room full of black people. I'm in a world full of white people, and every day they remind me that I'm black... When I show up at an account meeting they always have to regroup when they find out I'm the one who's responsible for their multimillion dollar acquisition. They'd rather trust it to a file clerk. The guy who gets me my goddamn coffee, because he's white... Do you know how insulting that is? [Something New 2006]

Religious identity often is conflated with racial or ethnic identity, which makes it difficult to view religious identity simply in terms of belonging to a particular religion [Feghali 1997].

According to Fussell, the magazines we read, the foods we eat, and the words we use often reflect our social class position. At some level, we recognize these class distinctions, but we consider it impolite to ask directly about a person's class background. Therefore, we may use communication strategies to place others in a class hierarchy [Fussell 1992; Engen 2004, 253]. It may be that *class identity* can even be seen in the particular social network sites young people join [Hargittai 2007]. Working-class communication is about getting things done, very different from the abstract conversations he was expected to participate in – designed to broaden perspective rather than to accomplish any particular task. In this respect, class is like race. For example, terms like *trailer trash* and *white trash* show the negative connotations associated with people who are not middle class [Moon, Rolison 1998]. Although class identity is not as readily apparent as, say, gender identity, it still influences our perceptions of and communication with others.

National identity or nationality, unlike racial or ethnic identity, refers to one's legal status in relation to a nation. Many U.S. citizens can trace their ethnicity to Latin America, Asia, Europe, or Africa, but their nationality, or citizenship, is with the United States, as in:

Mrs. Taylor: What you looking at?

Shonda: Girl, what you think I'm looking at? It's August in the Vineyard. I'm looking for Barack and Michelle [Jumping the Broom 2011].

In the United States *regional identities* remain important, but perhaps less so as the nation moves toward homogeneity. Many issues of identity are closely tied to our notions of self. Each of us has a *personal identity*, which is the sum of all our identities, but it may not be unified or coherent. We have many identities, and these can conflict in intercultural communication, as in:

Cristina Moreno: ... let me just say that our transportation into the United States was... economy class. In order to raise me properly... my mother needed as much of the security of her own culture as possible. So we rolled through Texas... just 34 % Hispanic... to Los Angeles... 48 % Hispanic. ... A few minutes adrift in an alien environment... then we turned a corner, and we were right back home. My mother's favorite cousin, Monica,

gave us shelter. For the next six years... neither of us ventured outside our new community. Mum worked two jobs, paying a total of \$450 a week... each of us doing everything we could to make things work. We were safe and happy. If only I could have stayed six. But I was blossoming. And during my very first dance... in the time it took a boy's hand... to go from my back to my bottom... it was evident that she would have to leave her night job... to keep a watchful eye on me. Within days, she was on her way to a job interview. She needed \$450 from one job. And that meant, after all her time in America... finally entering a foreign land [Spanglish 2004].

Given the many identities that we all negotiate for ourselves in our everyday interactions, it becomes clear how our identities and those of others make inter-cultural communication problematic. We need to think of these identities as both static and dynamic. We live in an era of information overload, and the wide array of communication media only serves to increase the identities we must negotiate. Consider the relationships that develop via e-mail, for example. Some people even create new identities as a result of online interactions. We change who we are depending on the people we communicate with and the manner of our communication. Yet we also expect some static characteristics from the people with whom we communicate. We expect others to express certain fixed qualities; these help account for why we tend to like or dislike them and how we can establish particular communication patterns with them. The tensions that we feel as we change identities from e-mail to telephone to mail to fax and other communication media demonstrate the dynamic and static characters of identities. We can focus on the personal-contextual dialectic of identity and communication. Although some dimensions of our identities are personal and remain fairly consistent, we cannot overlook the contextual constraints on our identity. The problem of erroneous assumptions has increased during the information age, due to the torrent of information about the world and the dynamic nature of the world in which we live. We are bombarded daily with information from around the globe about places and people. This glut of information and intercultural contacts has heightened the importance of developing a more complex view of identity.

Thus, identity has a profound influence on intercultural communication processes. In intercultural communication interactions mistaken identities are often exacerbated and can create communication problems.

В статье рассматриваются современные коммуникативные перспективы идентичности, ярлики, которые относятся к конкретной идентичности в процессе межкультурной коммуникации, а также разные типы идентичности, отображенные в американских фильмах, и влияние идентичности на процесс межкультурной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: идентичность, коммуникативные перспективы, ярлик, межкультурная коммуникация, американские художественные фильмы.

У статті розглядаються сучасні комунікативні перспективи ідентичності, ярлики, які відносяться до конкретної ідентичності в процесі міжкультурної комунікації, а також різні типи ідентичності, що відображені в американських фільмах та вплив ідентичності на процес міжкультурної комунікації.

Ключові слова: ідентичність, комунікативні перспективи, ярлик, міжкультурна комунікація, американські художні фільми.

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