

DISCURSIVE IDENTITY AND PROBLEM OF SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

Dmytro SHEVCHUK¹, Tetiana MATUSEVYCH²

Abstract: *The article examines the phenomenon of discursive identity, its nature and sources of the formation. Attributive characteristics of the discursive identity such as plasticity and processuality, interactive nature and its embedment into the broad cultural context, fragmentation, and decentralization of the subject are studied. Also, the interrelations between subject's autonomy and discursive identity are considered.*

Keywords: *identity, discourse, discursive identity, linguistic identity.*

I. Introduction

The variability of contemporary world phenomena, activation of transformational social changes has led to the need for understanding the complex ontological issues of a new reality. In this circle of questions, identity issues occupy a special place because of their explicit/tacit /implicit presence in any communicative act.

II. Speech acts: the concept of discursive identity

Based on the ideas of modern social theory and political philosophy we are going to use the concept of "discursive identity" for the understanding the actual problems of social communication with the Other. At this point, it is important to clarify what we mean using the concept of discursive identity. We support B. Brown's opinion on discursive identity, where it «reflects an understanding that speakers select genres of discourse with the knowledge (tacit or implicit) that others will ... interpret their discourse as a signal of their cultural membership»³.

The concept of discursive identity is derived from the context of the general belief of philosophers, culture theorists, and linguists in the change of paradigm that caused the adoption of a fundamentally new ontology – discursive. Speech acts and discourses play a major role in creating the

¹ National University of Ostroh Academy, Ukraine.

² National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, Ukraine.

³ Brown, B.A., Reveles, J.M., and Kelly, G.J., 2005. Scientific literacy and discursive identity: a theoretical framework for understanding science learning. *Science Education*, 89 (5), p. 783

social ontology. As it is was seen by J. Austin, we not only describe the world, but also do things with the words¹. In studies of the “discursive revolution”, there are observations that discursive phenomena occur primarily in the social and psychological sphere, in the process of communication between individuals, who perform appropriate communicative, social, cultural, interpersonal, ideological and psychological roles.

In this regard, we should pay attention to the S. Hall’s analysis of the three main concepts of identity, which are very different:

- 1) Enlightenment subject;
- 2) Sociological subject;
- 3) Post-modern subject.

The first concept, according to S. Hall, based on the conception of human being as fully centered. This was the very individualistic conception. The second concept is the product of modern world and tendencies of social and cultural development. S. Hall writes: “The notion of the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to “significant others”, who mediated to the subject the values, meanings, and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited”². The third concept of identity has a connection to post-modern conditions. This kind of identity is defined as “moveable feast”. S. Hall states that we have a deal with “[...] formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us”³.

The problem of identity is the very actual issue within this new paradigm. The solution of this problem depends primarily on discourse in the context of which it is discussed. At this point, let us consider the attributive characteristics of discursive identity phenomena in more detail.

Firstly, among the most important attributive characteristics of discursive identity should be considered its *plasticity* and *processuality*.

¹ Austin J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, pp.1-11.

² Hall S. (1996). The Question of Cultural Identity, in: *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, Kenneth Thompson, p. 597.

³ *Ibid*, p. 598.

The identity of a subject within this new paradigm is ticklish because the discourse theory offers understanding subject primarily as a subjective position within the discursive structure. Therefore, subject “loses” the selfness, and its identification becomes dependent of the discourse. The subject is not autonomous in this case; it is determined by the different social and political discourses and manifested in social space as fragmented. The modern theory of discourse (Ch. Mouffe, E. Laclau¹, M. Jorgensen, and L. Philips²) states that subjective position is not established by one discourse. It is more probably that subject gets many different positions which are created by different discourses. Thus, a person is dependent on conditions (rules and principles) of the discourse. In some aspect, this problem can be explained with using the term “linguistic identity” which we can find in linguistics.

Linguistic identity is a kind of identity that has a set of discursive properties at all phases of intellectual intercourse, such as orientation and planning speech and non-verbal actions, formulating action plans in linguistic form, correction (if necessary) speech acts. Based on this definition of linguistic identity, we can state that the realization capacity of discursive possibilities depends on the communicative situation. Also, individual identity is acquired only in the realization of its specific discursive properties. In other words, we can talk about a particular linguistic identity only in the case of realization its specific discursive properties of the subject in a particular discourse.

Secondly, it is important to note, *interactive nature* of discursive identity and its *embedment into a broad cultural context*.

The notion of discursive identity makes a shift of identity per se from the individual/private sphere to the collective/social one. Discursive identity as such is manifested and developed on the basis of one's own communicative experience and is woven into the broad cultural context. The social being makes us meet the Other/Alien, interpret his/her actions, and therefore – identify them. Such demand is caused by the fact that in an attempt to create our own identity, we feel the necessity to relate to something that is different from us. In other words in our social being, we

¹ See: Laclau, E., Mouffe, Ch., (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 197 p.

² Jorgensen, M., Phillips, L. (2002), *Discourse analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage Publications, 229 p.

try to comprehend the Other all the time, because it makes us possible to answer the question: "Whom are we?". The problem of our time is that the human itself appears as an alien, human being is presented as being which is covered by discursive practices and technologies. Moreover, in its social being human feels the abundance of signs and meanings that surround his/her, and as a result the social actor finds no other way to identify itself than through signs and discourses.

Discursive identity is a phenomenon of our time, as it is related to the nature of the culture and society in the postmodern era. According to Zygmunt Bauman, " [...] while it is true that identity 'continues to be the problem', this is not 'the problem it was throughout modernity'. Indeed, if the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open"¹ (Bauman 1996, 18).

Thirdly, among the most important attributive characteristics of discursive identity should be considered *fragmentation of the identity* and *decentralization of the subject*.

In the modern social and cultural context, it is an evident tendency to the fragmentation the identity, and this process has a strong connection to decentralization of the subject. Such tendencies have their origins in general feature of modern thinking which can be called "anti-Cartesianism" or "criticism the Descartes' conception of cogito". The analysis of this problem has been presented in S. Hall's paper "The Question of Cultural Identity".

III. Hall's five moments that decentrates subject

S. Hall defined five moments which had been influenced on the final decentralization of Cartesian cogito. The first one is connected to Marxist social theory. S. Hall states that new reading of Marx's works in 1960th established a point of view according to which persons are not real "authors" or acting actors of the history. This view is based on the belief that humans can act only in historical conditions created by others and they are forced to use resources which had been prepared by previous generations. The update interpretation of Marxism we can find in Z.

¹ Hall S. (1996). The Question of Cultural Identity, in: *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, Kenneth Thompson, pp. 595-694.

Bauman's work *The Individualized Society*. He writes: "[...] people make their lives but not under conditions of their choice. In the original as well as in its updated version, however, the thesis may be thought to imply that the realm of the conditions beyond choice and the field of action hospitable to purpose, calculation and decision are separate and stay so; that though their interaction presents a problem, the boundary which sets them apart is unproblematic – objective, and so not negotiable"¹. Such convictions make the background for social and cultural imagination, according which the identity of the subject could not be strong and stable.

The second moment of decentration the subject, as S. Hall states is Z. Freud's "discovery" the unconscious mind. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, our identity, our sexuality and the structure of our desires are based on psychic and symbolic processes that occur in the area of unconscious mind and operate according to the "logic" is quite different from the logic of reason. These convictions undermine the idea of the subject, that cognizes rationally and has fixed and unique identity. In this context, the example and kind of continuation of Freudian conception of the subject that led to its decentration are the J. Lacan's conception of the subject. This conception is based on the assumption that the idea of a true, holistic subject is a myth. Individual is structured through discourses, but this structuring is never complete. In addition, J. Lacan argues that identity is equivalent of identification with "something", and this "something" is a position of the subject that discourses give for the person. After all, if we refer to modern psychology, we find within the psychological concepts of identity (individual and social) general statement of dynamism and variability of human identity. There is the observation that identity develops throughout life nonlinearly and uneven, and the direction of its development can be as progressive, as regressive.

According to S. Hall, the third moment which has caused the decentration the subject and fragmentation of identity is the appearance of the structuralism. Within this methodological and philosophical conception, the meaning can be obtained only through language. Later the structuralists, such as J. Derrida, added the idea that person is never able to fix the meaning, including the meaning of its identity because the words often have polysemy.

¹ Bauman Z. (2001). *The individualized society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 7.

The fourth moment, which S. Hall determines, has a strong connection to the conception of the disciplinary power of M. Foucault. According to this conception, the main task of “disciplinary power” is the creation of such person, which can be treated as a body that is exposed orders. So the identity of a person depends on a network of disciplinary power and its strategies in social relations.

And the last moment that decentrates subject in the modern socio-cultural situation is the influence of feminism as theoretical social critique and political movement. Within feminism, we can find thinking of the problem of gender identities and denial the similarity between identities of men and women. Feminist theorists point out the functioning of suppression, occurred because of patriarchal discourse created by men. The following features are inherent in this discourse: the reflection of male experience as the norm, the identification of the feminine with the irrational, the definition of women as a person who is not a man, the exclusion of women's perspectives on the study, consideration of man's activity as a source of important changes, representation of the low status of women compared to man. Researchers often presume that “linguistic markers of men’s style and women’s style would be functionally linked to the traits and roles of men and women”¹. Moreover we can add that in gender studies the subject becomes decentrated more and more. Because of the fact that since the early 1970s, gender studies were under the influence of different theories and concepts that sometimes contradict one another: postmodernism, empiricism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, Marxism, critical theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer studies, LGBT studies, critical study of sexuality, concepts of physicality, and a wide range of feminist theories.

IV. Conclusions

Summarizing all abovementioned, we can conclude that the notion of discursive identity is a postmodern era “product”, which characterized by plasticity and processuality, interactive nature and its embedment into a broad cultural context, fragmentation and decentralization of the subject.

But how the eternal querying of philosophers on person’s freedom is reflected in the discursive paradigm? Ontological dimension of human existence is associated with the ratio of such philosophical categories as

¹ *Concise Encyclopedia of Semantics*, p. 348.

"choice" and "freedom." Choice is treated as a spiritual and practical procedure, during which individual consciousness performs selective advantage of some values and norms, rejecting others. Necessary ontological foundation of choice is the diversity of reality, diversity of life phenomena; the objective contradictions of any of the realities and the inability of human to cover everything at once. And in case of discursive identity, a person finds himself/herself in a kind of discursive captivity. As were mentioned before, subject "loses" the selfness, and its identification becomes dependent of the discourse. The subject is not autonomous in this case, it is determined by the different social and political discourses and manifested in social space as fragmented. It is more probably that subject gets many different positions which are created by different discourses. Thus, a person is dependent on conditions (rules and principles) of the discourse.

In a such situation of discursive captivity, a person has only a fragment of the phenomenon of the Other, the integrity of which was de-centered. At the same time, as John E. Joseph mentioned "identities are double-edged swords because, while functioning in a positive and productive way to give people a sense of belonging, they do so by defining an "us" in opposition to a "them" that becomes all too easy to demonise"¹

In the context of such problems with identity, the important issue of our times is cognition the Other and comprehension its authentic identification. It's obvious that new cultural reality demands to rethink the principles that we usually use for the cognition of the Other and development of our relations with him/her. Cultural reality makes us think whether we are able to perceive, understand and accept the way of seeing and structuring the world, aspirations, motives, feelings and expressions of the Others as carriers of cultural meanings that are incommensurable with ours.

¹ John E. Joseph. Linguistic identities. Double-edged swords. University of Edinburgh, p. 261

REFERENCES

- AUSTIN J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 167 p.
- BAUMAN Z. (1996). From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity, in: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Ed. by S. Hall, S. du Guy, London: SAGE, pp. 18-36.
- BAUMAN Z. (2001). *The individualized society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 272 p.
- ALLAN, Keith, and E. K. BROWN. 2009. *Concise encyclopedia of semantics*. Boston: Elsevier
- HALL S. (1996). The Question of Cultural Identity, in: *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, Kenneth Thompson, pp. 595-694.
- JOSEPH J.E. Linguistic identities: Double-edged swords. *Language Problems and Language Planning*. 2006; 30(3), p. 261-267.
- JORGENSEN, M., Phillips, L. (2002), *Discourse analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage Publications, 229 p.
- LACLAU, E., Mouffe, Ch., (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 197 p.
- BROWN, B.A., Reveles, J.M., and Kelly, G.J., 2005. Scientific literacy and discursive identity: a theoretical framework for understanding science learning. *Science Education*, 89 (5), 779–802