



Identity In Question

Language Approach

Voice over

Dr Peter Redman, an Open University staff tutor in Sociology, discusses with Professor Stuart Hall some of the concepts central to the subject of language approach to identity. Stuart Hall is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Open University and as a key figure in the development of the subject of language approach is ideally placed to guide you through the debates.

Peter Redman

Hello, my name's Peter Redman and we're going to be exploring some of the main issues surrounding the subject of language approach and to help us with this task we have with us Professor Stuart Hall. Stuart – hello.

Stuart Hall

Hi.

Peter Redman

Perhaps a good place for us to start is to think about the subject of language approach itself and I wondered if you could tell us why you think this particular approach to identity formation has been so influential within cultural studies and allied fields.

Stuart Hall

Well I think that the most important reason is because of the different conceptional identity which it entails. I mean there is a notion that our identities are pretty firmly fixed, as it were, from birth and last throughout our lives more or less unchanged, they are the sort of 'real me' inside, and that notion of identity really picks up on the association of the term identity itself with sameness, so our identities in this conception is the bit of us that remains the same, in spite of the fact that we appear to change, and I think the most important thing is the different conception of identity now which suggests that identity is not this internal kernel of our true selves, but is really something which is formed very much in interaction with the contexts in which we exist – first of all the contexts of childhood in relation to our significant others – our parents or whoever's looking after us in early childhood – and then the wider circle of the culture as a whole, but always we ourselves are actually formed in a kind of conversation or dialogue with others, and the very thing that we feel is so most intimately us is really formed partly by psychically drawing into ourselves those perceptions of us which others hold, rather than something which comes from the sort of kernel of ourselves unformed or unrelated, or what's happening outside. Now, that shift in the conception of identity really owes a great deal to theories of language because until I suppose the revolution inaugurated by Saussure, the French linguist, people thought of language very much as the names for things so there was a kind of simpler relationship between the thing out there and the word thing, but Saussure had a very different perception of language. You think of language as really a social practice, not an individual thing, and we can't be the authors of our meaning since the essence of language is to communicate with somebody else, so they must at least share the code of the language in order to interpret what we are saying, and therefore something like identity is formed, that is to say, within what Saussure calls the systems of difference that language forms, language that is to say are composed of much of what he calls the marked elements and their relation to the unmarked elements. Thus, to be very simple, you only know what day means if you know what night means, that is to say if you know what day is not, and therefore the very concept of night includes its opposite, day, in the same sense as the concept of myself includes the others with which I'm in communication. So the subject of language is really a way of saying that language has given us a new model for thinking about how identities are formed and what identity consists of.

Peter Redman

I want to pick up on one of the things you say there because you just mentioned difference as being absolutely central to Saussure's ideas about language, and therefore something that's become central to how people who've taken up his ideas have theorised identity – can you say what you think – what difference does focusing on difference make to how we think about identity – why is that important?

Stuart Hall

The main point that is that it breaks up the sort of singular notion, the singular unified notion of a self and it constructs ourselves, therefore, more in relation to what Saussure called a system of differences, and what he meant by that was that the meanings of language do have, they compose a kind of system in which we have to locate ourselves in order to say anything we have to enter the code of our language and position ourselves within the language in order to speak at all or to make sense, in order to communicate something to someone else. And that is therefore a notion that the things which, as it were, separate us from the other, or those meanings which are not included in what we want to say, nevertheless bear on what things we are saying, you know. We can never, for example, control exactly what we mean because always the language has the echoes of all the other ways in which our words mean something to other people, and we can't prevent those echoes from arising in the mind of the other. I say mother, and I think my mother is a wonderful person, but your mother is not, so you include the fact that the relationships with mothers are rather problematic, and I'm trying to tell you how self singular, how straightforward the mother-child relationship is, and all the time you are bringing to what I've said this notion that it's a, and we're actually talking about a very complex and rather ambivalent relationship, so in that sense we have always to be concerned with what is not included in what we call our identity in what some theorists call the constitutive outside – what appears to be outside the self, is forming the self, what appears to be outside what we mean by a particular sentence is forming the sentence, and therefore we should be concerned as much with those differences as we are concerned with things which are the same.

Peter Redman

And presumably that links into very closely to Derrida's Notion of Différance?

Stuart Hall

Yes because there are different ways in which you can think about difference – I mean there are straightforward contrasts between black and white but the differences which we're talking about in language are almost never as simply either/or as the difference between black and white. They occur very much along a much wider spectrum, you know, black but black which is nearly grey and then light grey and very pale grey, hardly ever is language literally about black and white, just as we are never quite about ourselves and something that we might become. We're always sort of in between the self we are now and the self we might be in ten years' time, so rather we have to think of language and meaning as continually slipping or sliding along a spectrum of differences, rather than some simple either/or binary sort of opposition between right and wrong, or good and bad and so on. And this notion which Derrida indicates by writing the word difference with what he calls an anomalous 'a' – he writes it d-i-f-f-e-r-a-n-c-e, so it's differance, and the interesting thing is that in French this sounds exactly like difference but actually it's not like it, in the writing you know he's not talking about the difference that we used to think of, which was a simple binary thing, but more the kind of sliding, the infinite sliding of meaning, meaning he would say it's like identity in that it is never fixed, you can never bring it to an end. You can bring a sentence to an end, but your meaning is always in excess of the sentence that you have just expressed, and identity is rather like that. We are either fuller of things, or less full of things than we imagine ourselves to be. We're never quite in place in that sense and that means that a notion of difference which of course you can apply, you know, in many circumstances you can apply to sexual difference which is one of the most basic ways in which the subject first positions itself in culture and in the world, or you can think of differences of race, or you can simply think of the differences between the people we know and the people we don't – doesn't matter where the border is – but that border is always invading, what can I say, the outside of language is always invading the interior, so you can never preserve the interior or the sense of self secure, fixed, firm, unchanging, from the passage of time and the sliding of meaning.