

# Identity's Playground:

## Linking Second Language Use with Strategic Competence

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### Abstract

This case study examines how a French immigrant of Senegalese descent negotiates his L2 identity at a multicultural and multilingual workplace environment in the United States. The article is the result of a six-month qualitative case study in which the subject was shadowed and interviewed at his place of employment. The study explores the relationship between strategic competence and social identity and examines how the participant's social identity and successful employment are linked to strategies of L2 language use and identity negotiation.

**Key Words:** Identity, Second Language Identity, L2 strategies, Sociolinguistics, strategic competence

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The notion of Strategic Competence as postulated by Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence model is generally associated with L2 learners' ability to employ a variety of tools that facilitate the learning of a target language. It has continuously expanded over the past few decades as researchers have explored both typologies and different systems of classification (see, e.g., Rubin 1981; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). Furthermore, as Nyikos and Oxford (1993: 11) claim "strategic competence fosters competence in grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic areas. Thus, strategy research permeates all areas of learning, recognizing that learning is multidimensional". While it is evident that good language learners employ a variety of strategies (see, e.g., Reiss 1985; Rubin 1975; Naiman, Frohlich, & Todesco 1975; Ramirez 1986; Stern 1975) from which we can and have learned a great deal, there remains a fundamental difference between language learning strategies and language use strategies.

Language use strategies often pertain to the social and affective realm of second language acquisition and, as Oxford (1994) suggests, are less frequently researched. Even current research may fall short of a truly re-conceptualized understanding of how social strategies of use develop contextually. Many researchers are content with viewing social strategies as merely devices for "getting along" in social situations such as "asking questions for clarification or verification, asking for help, and collaborating with others via language" (Hsiao & Oxford 2002: 369). In reality, these social strategies are often much more complex and contextually dependent. Part of the complexity lies in the fact that often they may be seen as developing at the subconscious level and the language user may be unaware of their use (Cohen 1998). Cohen suggests that at this level we are in fact dealing with processes.

If language can be considered a tool which human beings use to engage in social acts then exploring other factors, such as social identity issues and socio-cultural strategies (see, e.g. Savignon & Sysoyev 2002) may lead to a more complete understanding of how strategies develop. Since making the shift from second language learner to second language user implies an emphasis on social factors that inherently involve identity negotiation, we cannot ignore that there may be an element of choice involved in who we present ourselves to be in certain contexts. While Cohen (1995) generally supports the "getting along in the target culture" view of social strategies, he includes the notion of choice. Specifically, he defines social strategies as "actions which learners choose to take in order to interact with other learners and with native speakers" (Cohen 1995:2). It is at this point where social identity intersects with social strategies.

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on the nexus between second language acquisition and identity (see, e.g. Gumperz 1982; McNamara 1997; Norton 1997, 1995; Miller 1999). All agree that

the individual cannot be separated from the social environment with respect to language use. Dunn (1997) states that "human thought and behavior are understood as discursive practices, constituted in and through the structures and uses of language" (Dunn 1997:691). Norton's (1995) poststructuralist approach defines the language learner/user as possessing a complex and dynamic social identity that must be understood with reference to the larger context or social scene in which they occur. This implies that if identity is contextually dependent, then learners must face choices as they interact with others and these interactions are in turn dependent on the greater context. An awareness of the social context implies a choice from the existing repertoire of contextually appropriate responses.

Both Norton (1995, 1997) and McNamara (1997) provide the conceptual framework for the social identity of second language users and learners and provide the theoretical basis of this investigation. Framing L2 social identity from the poststructuralist perspective intersects with the notion of strategic competence at the social level, and consequently, ushers in the questions which guide this study. First, if second language users develop strategic competence socially, how is identity negotiated in the process of using the target language? Second, how does context play a role in strategy use? Third, can we speak of strategizing L2 identity in multicultural settings? Finally, how can we better qualify the term "getting along with others" as an integral part of being socially strategically competent?

### **Research Site and Participant**

This study follows the advice of Oxford and Crookall (1989) that "language learning strategy investigation should thoroughly examine less formal (non-classroom) situations in which people gain skills in a new language" (Oxford and Crookall 1989:415). One such situation can be found in the manufacturing and processing sectors of the American economy. These sectors employ many immigrant workers who come to the United States for employment opportunities. The jobs themselves, chiefly factory line work, are often low-wage entry level positions with high rates of recidivism. The research site for this study occurred in precisely what Oxford and Crookall (1989) referred to as a "less formal (non-classroom)" environment and contained a unique environment that was fecund with multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Several years ago, a small processing and packaging plant in the Midwest of the United States experienced a demographic shift that radically altered its social climate. Prior to 1995, the majority of the workers in the plant were English speaking American men and women. After 1995, there was a large influx of West Africans who spoke a variety of tribal languages such as Wolof and Fulani. The resulting pool of diverse languages was tempered by the French language which served as a lingua franca for the West Africans. The wave of new immigrants created many challenges for the traditional Anglo-American workers and managers who were now faced with a variety of new issues regarding employees such as cultural misunderstandings, miscommunications, misinterpretations, and religious differences (the majority of the West Africans are Muslims).

Out of this *mélange* of new faces and cultures one individual emerged as the liaison between the immigrant workers and the management. He is Mamadou, a thirty-seven year old male natively born in France, but of Senegalese descent. His native language is French, and he also speaks Wolof, Fulani, and American English. Mamadou pertained to what he considered to be a "middle class" background and was educated in the French school system and ultimately graduated from a French university with a degree in electrical engineering. He came to the United States in 1997 when he knew virtually no English and had been exposed to American culture only on a few short trips to New York City. Through familial connections, he moved to the Midwest for an employment opportunity at the research site and took on a factory line worker position. Mamadou's acquisition of English was rapid. He quickly proved that he was a fast learner and via his language skills moved up the corporate ladder. He currently holds the position of trainer which puts him into direct contact with all of the West African employees and all of the American managers. Mamadou's case, though, is anything but typical. His French nationality and cultural background set him apart from the other West Africans, and he has become an important human resource for the plant as he is involved in problem solving, dispute resolution, translating and interpreting, in addition to training. An important factor in this study is that when he began working for the company, he spoke very little English yet rapidly acquired it and advanced in the corporate hierarchy because of his language skills and ability to relate with a variety of individuals of diverse backgrounds.

## Methodology

Social identity and social strategic competence are inherently complex and individualistic. The ethnographic case study approach was chosen in order to fully understand the individual dynamics of the participant at his place of employment. Specifically, theory-based or operational construct sampling was chosen. According to this type of sampling, "the sample becomes by definition, representative of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton 1990:177). In this case, the phenomenon of interest is the participant's social identity in his second language. The study relies on two methods of data collection, observation and interviews. The observations lasted for a period of 6 months from August, 2000 through the end of January, 2001 in which the participant was shadowed during working hours. Through shadowing, I observe how he communicates within the speech communities of the cultures and contexts of the site. The observations serve to provide a more complete picture of the influences that are either exerted on the site by the participant or exerted on the participant by the site. The focus of the observations is Mamadou's use of language in the variety of social identities that are part of his daily routine.

In order to explain the phenomena on a more personal level, four interviews were conducted during the observations. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interviews are conceptualized with a general interview guide approach. This is a semi-structured type of interview in which the participant is able to generate talk and select the conversational path s/he chooses. The interview data are fundamentally narrative in nature. Schiffrin (1996), in addressing narrative data, believes that narrative language captures aspects of identity. She states that narrative reveals aspects of identity in relation to verbalizing and situating experiences and additionally, displays the self, position, and role that the speakers portray. She suggests that participant narrative is a vital source of data.

## Data Analysis

The initial analysis of both the observations and the interviews were conducted through the use of coding. There are two phases of the coding process. The first phase of the analysis concerns constructing a descriptive reality of general codes that exist at the site. It also embodies the subject's interaction with the site. The codes are largely field notes and observations. Some social interaction was directly audio-taped. The second phase of the coding involves the interview data and obtains a more detailed look at the themes that have emerged from the observations. The theme of language and identity emerges recurrently throughout the coding process in both the interview and the observational data, and upon further analysis two general themes or aspects of identity surface: social awareness and the construction of relationships. In order to make sense of the data these two themes are divided into subcategories. In terms of constructing relationships both the interview and observational data highlight four distinct ways in which Mamadou built relationships at the site with both immigrants and American workers at the plant. They are: 1) the building of trust 2) developing roles 3) the issue of respect, and 4) community involvement. Social awareness is achieved through possessing knowledge of contexts and recognition of social place. Additionally, the categorizations serve to answer the questions which guide this study.

## Constructing Relationships

### *Building Trust*

Mamadou interacted daily with a variety of individuals from a variety of ethno-linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds. During the course of his interactions, he established a variety of relationships with all of these individuals during working hours when he was "on the clock" in addition to the time that he spent with immigrant workers during "off the clock" lunch or break times. His position as intermediary between the line workers and the management placed him in the position of having to maintain relationships with both. Skepticism of his intentions and position with respect to the predominantly white management arose immediately with the line workers as he explains:

I think the Africans they at the beginning when I started working as their lead... cuz they had... they was disappointed a lot with the guy who had my job before. He was African... a fully African and he didn't take care of them at all.

And when I got there the first week, I had to go introduce myself to all of them, walk through the line... talk to them, and they didn't trust me... when I first talk to them they heard my accent, my French accent,

cuz I had to talk to them in French because, you know, I didn't know who was from where and you know what language they was speaking. I didn't want to offend anybody speaking, you know, Wolof cuz there is a lot of Fulani working there and I didn't want to ummm that they have that problem with language, you know, like Wolof trying to impose their language, so me speaking French was like more neutral.

The decision to speak French with the workers is Mamadou's first attempt at establishing a normal working relationship with them. More importantly, he is seen as an outsider and is attempting to build trust with them and set himself apart from the previous individual who had his job as someone who will be there for them and who understands them. He continues:

What amazed them the most was the fact I wasn't sitting with Wolof or Mandinka...I would sit with everybody. I would come to lunch, sit with these people, and the next time I would come sit with a different group from a different country and listen to them talk their language...you know, like I wasn't there to to be just with the Wolof. I sit with everybody

American, African, Mexican, everybody.

The break room at the company is a large room that contains sixteen large rectangular tables. Interestingly, during break times, the room is filled with employees eating or gathered together and chatting. Each table is organized by ethnic group. So, when Mamadou explains that he sits with them all, he means that during this time he joins in on many of the conversations and engages many cultures including American.

### *Role Development*

In addition to building trust, Mamadou takes on a variety of different roles. In part, the roles are associated with his position in the company. However, further analysis indicates that the roles have more to do with how he is interpreted by the other workers and how he consciously responds to them. In other words, he portrays his interpretation of what roles they assign him. As he explains:

I don't know what their impression is, but you know they call me boss. They call me captain, they call me all those army stuff, you know, they call me cherno, which is the spiritual leader, they call me dugutigi which is like head of village, and they call me comandante, and they call me general...even though I'm younger than them.

While the titles of general, captain, and comandante may be associated with his position of power and his job responsibilities, the role of cherno and dugutigi are of particular interest. They imply a care-giver or fatherly responsibility and in this case they are earned. Mamadou says:

I feel good with everybody you know I talk to everybody. Uh, even though I help African people a lot, I'm more there helping them, pushing them, you know, trying to take care of their problems.

Mamadou's father-like role is evident by the fact that he pushes them in the right direction and wants his employees to do the right thing. This is supported by the observational data as well. While working, he is in constant demand as a problem solver even with personal matters between employees. The field notes include many instances of employees asking for advice on personal matters. In one case, a young Wolof speaking male asks him for advice on relationships with African-American women. Mamadou stepped outside and had a conversation with the worker. In another case, an Arab man asks him for advice about health insurance.

### *Respect*

Mamadou's variety of roles and his building of trust are additionally achieved through the notion of respect. Respect is a two way street in the context of this workplace. Respect is earned by Mamadou because he displays it to the immigrant workers. In one instance, he reprimands a younger employee for not respecting an older employee. The younger employee was not using the proper register while addressing an older employee. Mamadou says:

The other day I was having a conversation with a young boy and I said "Why you keep talking to him like that? You know this guy he's a lot older than you, why you talking to him like that? He said, "Man, here in America, America is like everybody has the same age." I said, "No, don't

forget where you are from. You know, I call that guy uncle you know, uncle the operator I call him you know...He's really proud of me calling him uncle even though he call me general and all that, he still know that I have respect for him."

Respect in this community is essential for the employees in order to be able to work together well. It manifests itself in a conscious awareness of register, with addressing someone as uncle, as the previous excerpt indicates and in action as the following discussion reveals.

### *Community Involvement*

Mamadou himself is very active and involved in the immigrant community during off hours and during working hours. In particular, he demonstrates his community involvement at the workplace in the form of advocacy. He often has advocated for change with respect to how the immigrants are treated. On several occasions, he earned the respect of the other West Africans through confrontations with the company management and other American employees on behalf of the West Africans. At one point the management decided to offer several mandatory seminars that dealt with West African and Hispanic cultures. These were initiated to enable the American workers to better understand the cultures of these two groups of people and to ensure a more harmonious environment. The following narrates how Mamadou defends his position in support of the immigrant community during this period. Mamadou says:

A lot of 'em came just to to to disturb me (reference is to the American line workers). Oh, they had a problem with that because what I was doing, it was like to help develop communication between cultures, but some of them didn't like it. They wanted to be like before when black people was there and white people was here. And they didn't like that, so they came to prove me that I was wrong trying to do that. "They should be learning English before they came here." they said. And I'm like man, these people found you... You don't know where they from and they know where you from and they even learning your language, so open up to them.

In this case Mamadou advocates for a change of perspective from the Americans and essentially challenges them to do so. He defends the immigrant workers and, through defending them, must defend himself. He continues, "And they thought just I was one of them, you know, so they would try to dominate me, try to make out of me a puppet, you know, and I say no."

His activism began in the early days of his employment with the company as he states:

When I worked on the line I was defending them already. I was going to HR you know, talk to them about stuff and one day they had only pork pizza in the break room. Everything was pork and African people couldn't eat it. I went to HR and say, "What's that? You know we making that cheese pizza, that's the cheapest pizza you can make. How come we don't have cheese pizza? We don't eat. They don't eat all day and

everybody's complaining. And that guy I talked to at HR say, "you take and eat what we give you." I say, "Man thank you very much, but you keep it, cuz we don't eat it, but thank you for your time" and I left.

Mamadou's confrontation with the individual in HR led to a change in the break room lunch selection. Through consciously positioning himself as an advocate for the immigrants, gaining respect, and earning titles, he consolidates and forges relationships at a variety of levels. The social construction of relationships hinges upon the other domain of interest to this study, social awareness.

### **Social Awareness**

#### *Knowledge of Context and Recognition of Social Hierarchy of Site*

Mamadou's ability to build so many relationships at the company is due to the fact that he is aware of his surroundings. His awareness manifests itself in two fundamental ways: knowledge and recognition. He possesses knowledge of both cultural and linguistic contexts. In addition, he recognizes immediately the social hierarchy of the setting and the social class distinctions of the various workers. He is multilingual and multicultural. Yet, his awareness of the cultures and languages is not unilateral. He exerts awareness and sparks interest in others thus making it bi-directional. Until his arrival at the company there were many misunderstandings and misgivings about the immigrant population. His rapid acquisition of English, and in particular the use of register, and understanding of the culture of his workplace only aided in his capability to help people understand the immigrant population.

During the course of the observational phase, one sees that not only does his ability to say the right thing make a difference in his professional development, but also it is evident in the choice of language that he produces. When speaking to the Americans at the plant, he greets them with the popular expression "Wassup?." On one occasion, when he walks over to the main offices at the company, he immediately changes register and greets the managerial staff with the noticeably articulated "Hello". Another instance of his sociolinguistic competence occurred outside when an elderly white security guard walked by and the following jocular exchange occurred:

Mamadou: How are you sir?

Security: I was doin' alright 'til I saw you.

This simple exchange carries with it a lot of meaning. Mamadou's use of "sir" immediately concedes authority to the security officer. In addition, it is representative of the respect he implicitly warrants the officer. The notion of language choice is important because he consciously chooses how to greet people based on both his relationship with them at the company and an understanding of their roles in the company hierarchy.

The role of kinesics must be noted in describing Mamadou's nonverbal interactions with employees. What is interesting to note is that again one sees his recognition and knowledge of the context. When speaking with the African employees he stands closer, leaning forward to indicate interest in what they are saying. This only occurred while speaking Wolof and French. He also clutches on to the arms of those to whom he is speaking and actually makes physical contact with them. This did not occur while addressing the American employees. He appears to be intuitively accessing the aspect of conversational style that is culturally associated with whomever he is speaking. He is socially aware and possesses knowledge of a variety of social contexts and his role in the contexts. While the preceding data are limited to acts of register, the data reveal that Mamadou has advanced in the company based on his ability to forge relationships and maintain intercultural harmony and communication at the site.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout this study, Mamadou consciously negotiates his identity strategically and positions himself in relation to the other employees. By building trust, taking on a variety of different roles in the company, respecting others, and becoming an advocate for the immigrant population of the site he has constructed relationships in a unique way. This is achieved through possessing social awareness which implies knowledge of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic contexts and the recognition of the individual's place in relation to the contexts. His social strategic competence is linked directly to how he displays his identity and this ultimately has helped him in advancing in the company.

Second language use and strategic competence are intricately linked to social identity and how we display ourselves in the target culture. When we engage in talk we are constantly displaying who we are and we have the ability to choose who we present ourselves to be. Often, in Mamadou's case, he positions his talk based on an understanding of who he is and, more noticeably, how others expect someone in his position to be or act. His workplace identity and speech in turn are co-constructed. His personality is meshed with his own interpretation of how to be and what others' expectations of him are to be. In his case, very often they are conscious decisions that are based on his understanding of the socially co-constructed context of the workplace. Therefore, this study expands on the notion of strategic competence to include the concept of social identity and ultimately makes way for future studies regarding social identity strategies. As each individual possesses a unique identity, social identity

strategies in L2 environments are extremely dynamic and context specific. This complexity then is much richer than the notion of just "getting along" in a target language and culture. It implies a highly complex system of interacting with and, in some cases, influencing the target culture.

### *Implications*

This study has implications for those involved with researching strategies of second language use and learning and those involved with the training of immigrant workers. It suggests that second language social identity strategies may best be conceptualized as pertaining to the notion of communicative competence at the strategic level. By knowing how to qualify L2 social identity strategies as they occur in the sociolinguistic realm of daily life, a more complete understanding of strategic competence ensues. Furthermore, the notion of communicative competence is further extended to include what many researchers consider to be an important part of the L2 acquisition process, namely identity. Mamadou's case also sheds light on what successful immigrants can achieve through learning the target language and, more importantly, understanding contexts. Merely having the ability to speak the second language is not as important socially as what one does with the language. This seems to be achieved through awareness. The research sheds light on the importance of interacting in and with the target culture. Multilingual and multicultural work environments can be harmonious places of exchange based on language and cultural awareness by all. Employee trainers in companies that have international employees stand to benefit by understanding what other immigrants have experienced, what they know, and how they have negotiated their L2 identities in the target culture and workplace environment.

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