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Kate Power

INVESTIGATING RELIGIOUS "IDENTITY": THE PROMISE AND PROBLEM OF DISCOURSE ANALYTIC METHODS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES INQUIRIES

Dr Kate Power holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Lancaster University (UK) and a Masters degree in Christian Studies from Regent College (Canada). She teaches Arts Studies in Research and Writing at the University of British Columbia, with a focus on religion and international development.

The Department of English
University of British Columbia
397 - 1873 East Mall (Buchanan Tower)
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

katpower@mail.ubc.ca

ABSTRACT

This article describes a fieldwork case study which integrates religious studies with various discourse analytic methods, to examine how contemporary Christian identities are represented in conversation. Based on interviews and focus groups with 46 residents of a small town in rural Canada, this research is primarily concerned with religious *talk* – in particular, with the "social practice" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258) of "talking [religious] identity" (Hadden and Lester, 1978). In this article, I will review briefly how "identity" is conceptualized in contemporary discourse analysis studies, before describing both the challenge of selecting appropriate linguistic methods for the investigation of religious identity, and the impact upon my research of adopting particular methods.

Keywords: identity; linguistics; Membership Categorization Analysis; religion; research methods; stance analysis.

1 Introduction

The question of personhood – of "what kind of entity is the human" (Gunton, 1991: 47) – has long been a major preoccupation of religion. Yet, notwithstanding

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a plentiful theological, pastoral, and sociological literature concerning the formation of individuals within specific religious traditions (see, for example, Arjouch and Kusnow, 2007; Barker, 1984; Chong, 1998; Davidman, 1990; Goldstein and Goldstein, 1996; Heilman, 1996; Kim, 2000; Lawson, 1999; Yang, 1999), the analysis of religious identity *per se* has only quite recently begun to register as a concern within the field of religious studies (see, for example, Ammerman, 2003; Barker, 2006; Cadge and Davidman, 2006; Day, 2006 and 2009; Hammond, 1988; Mol, 1976 and 1978; Woodhead, 1999). Indeed, the notion of religious identity is usually addressed only in passing by religious studies scholars insofar as:

1. it is construed as either *private* or *public* (that is, conflated with membership in particular religious groups), and thus used to bolster opposing positions in the debate over secularization theory (as in Davie, 1994); or
2. it facilitates the analysis of religious conversion (as in Neitz, 1987; Thumma, 1991).

This oversight is not surprising, since religious affiliation has traditionally been regarded as something which is "received or bestowed" (Woodhead, 1999: 59), rather than chosen (Queen II, 1996). From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, however, religious studies scholars began to recognize the contribution of personal choice to formal religious affiliation (Berger, 1967), thus paving the way for new lines of inquiry into both the nature of religious identity and the methods by which it might be studied.

In this article, I will describe one fieldwork case study conducted in rural Canada which applied various discourse analytic methods to the investigation of contemporary Christian identities. Based on data generated in interviews and focus groups with 46 residents of Claresholm, a small town in the Canadian province of Alberta, this research has an intentionally local focus – and, in this respect, it resembles the Kendal Project (Heelas *et al*., 2004), which studied religious expressions in one English locality. This study does not claim, therefore, to represent Canada or other parts of the world. Rather, it provides a close and detailed analysis of religious identities in one location, the complexity of which is likely only to be magnified in other, larger settings.

Unlike the Kendal Project, however, which was a sociological investigation of different forms of religiosity, the study I will describe here is primarily concerned with religious *talk* – in particular, with the "social practice" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258) of "talking [religious] identity" (Hadden and Lester, 1978). The research questions around which it is organized are, therefore:

1. how do rural Canadians discursively construe their own religious identities in "talk-in-interaction" (Schegloff, 1987: 207)? and
2. how do religious discourses intersect with other public sphere discourses in such talk?

I will begin my description of this case study by explaining briefly the conceptualization of "identity" upon which it is founded, distinguishing between the related notions of "construal" and "construction" (Section 2). I will then explain my choice of Claresholm as the geographical site for this research (Section 3.1) and summarize my fieldwork procedures (Section 3.2), noting various methodological challenges involved in these aspects of my research. Next, I will discuss in some detail the challenge of selecting appropriate discourse analytic methods for the investigation of religious identity (Section 4). Finally, I will describe the impact of my choice of research methods on the results of this case study (Section 5), before arguing for the relevance of close linguistic analysis to religious studies inquiries (Section 6).

2 Religious Identity: A Discursive Construal

Conceptualizations of "religion" abound (e.g. Durkheim, [1912] 1995; Freud, [1927] 1964, [1937] 1951; Marx, [1843] 1970; Weber, [1922] 1993) – in view of which, it is perhaps best to regard all definitions as "made for the purposes of study, rather than as any final assertion of the nature of religion" (Hargrove, 1989: 29). In the present case study, I adopted Martin E. Marty's (1997: 11, emphasis added) proposal that one begins by asking, "What...are the phenomena that have long *been called* religious and that manifest themselves today under several guises and in many modes?" This is not to suggest that all of my informants categorized themselves as "religious" – rather, only, that I explicitly invited them to position themselves in relation to "religion" (cf. Day, 2006).

Comparatively little attention has been paid to the question of "identity" within the field of religious studies. Yet, *identity* is a word used so frequently within wider scholarly circles that Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005: 608) maintain, "It is no overstatement to assert that the age of identity is upon us, not only in sociocultural linguistics but also in the human and social sciences more generally." Like *religion*, however, *identity* is also a word that suffers from overuse (Grad and Martín Rojo, 2008; Meyer, 2001). Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000: 1) observe, for example, that "Identity...tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)." Nevertheless, Richard Jenkins (2004: 5) argues that *identity* remains a useful notion, provided one always regards it as meaning "identification."

This is the view of "identity" which predominates in contemporary discourse analytic studies. Charles Antaki and Sue Widdicombe (1998: 2, emphasis added), for example, deny that individuals "passively or latently *have* this or that identity which then causes feelings and actions," arguing instead that individuals "work up and work to this or that identity, for themselves and others, there and then, either as an end in itself or towards some other end." Similarly, Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 588) describe identity as "the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices." Thus, identity is now more commonly regarded as something constructed by individuals as they negotiate diverse category memberships in specific contexts, via linguistic and other social practices (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2003).

This conceptualization of identity differs significantly from that held by many religious (and non-religious) individuals, for whom the traditional, realist notion of a unitary "self," with its inherent qualities existing independently of either context or language – a concept now widely critiqued as "essentialist" (Widdicombe, 1998: 194) – still often serves as a resource for organizing and understanding their own identities (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 477; see also Ivanič, 1998; Wodak *et al.*, 1999). It also differs foundationally from the view that social identities – such as religious affiliation, gender/sexuality, age, and so on – might be consulted as predictive of behaviour. For, where multiple constructions of identity are possible, individuals (and groups) become free not only to contest the (identity) "cards" they have been "dealt," but also to forge new, and potentially more advantageous, identities (Laclau, 1990: 40). In Akesha Baron's (2004) study of evangelical discourse in Mexico, for example, a socially disadvantaged Protestant woman was found to have increased her social influence by strategically drawing on evangelical discourse: talking to and about God with her neighbours, she highlighted her religious identity, rather than her gender. In doing so, she not only succeeded in overcoming "gender as a factor of primary relevance" (Baron, 2004: 253), but also materially altered circumstances for her family, opening the way for her son to marry against the social customs of her village.

It is important to distinguish between the discursive "construal" and "construction" of identity, however (as advised by Fairclough, 2003: 8; see also Fairclough, 2009: 513; Sayer, 2000). For, as Baron's (2004) study implies, material and structural realities both influence and constrain social agents and phenomena – and their disabling by "talk-in-interaction" (Schegloff, 1987: 207) is by no means guaranteed. Consequently, although "construction" is the term most often used to describe the discursive realization of social identities, it is critical to recognize that "we may textually *construe* (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether [or not] our representations or construals have the effect of changing its *construction* depends upon various contextual factors – including the way social reality already is, who is construing it, and so forth" (Fairclough, 2003: 8, emphasis added). In short, *construal* (interpretation) does not equal *construction* (fashioning); neither are all construals of identity adequate, nor all attempts at identity construction successful.

3 Claresholm: A Rural Canadian Case Study

3.1 Prioritizing "everyday religion"

Grace Davie (2006: 139) observes that – notwithstanding the increased significance now awarded to religion as a contributor to world affairs – religion continues to be regarded "as a 'problem,'" with scholarly attention more often focusing on "reactive forms of religion, notably fundamentalism" than on "the myriad forms of religion in the modern world that are an integral part of everyday life for millions of people and which show no sign of diminishing as modernity asserts itself in different ways across the globe" (see also Bramadat, 2005).

It was with a view to redressing this imbalance that, in 2004 and 2005, I conducted 31 individual qualitative interviews and two focus groups in Claresholm – a small town on the westernmost edge of Canada's prairies, in which I had lived for approximately two years some years prior to undertaking this research.

Statistics Canada (2001) reports that almost 90 per cent of Claresholm's 3,500 residents are Canadian-born, over 90 per cent English-only speakers, and less than four per cent visible minorities.[1] Claresholm is thus by no means a model of cultural, racial or linguistic diversity. It is, however, host to some interesting religious differences. The town is located in what many perceive to be Canada's "Bible belt" and religion is an important aspect of the local community. Indeed, for its size, Claresholm boasts considerable diversity of Christian religious expressions, including churches representing ten denominations[2] and three Hutterite colonies.[3]

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[1] For those unfamiliar with the peculiarities of Canadian multicultural discourse, "visible minorities" is a term used routinely by Canadian legislators, policy makers, media and scholars alike to refer to persons (other than Aboriginal persons) who are neither Caucasian in race nor white in colour.

[2] Claresholm's churches are affiliated with the following denominations: the Anglican Church in Canada, the Baptist Union of Western Canada, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Church of the Nazarene, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church of Canada, and the Victory Church.

[3] One Lehrerleut and two Dariusleut colonies are located in the vicinity of Claresholm.

My selection of Claresholm as the geographic site for my research was also inspired by Danièle Hervieu-Léger's (2000: 29) prioritization of popular manifestations of religion – which is an approach that, David Lyon argues, warrants

> caution about generalizing about religion in Canada from the views of certain mainstream denominational theological seminaries or the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, and a willingness to listen to persons from one of the prairie Bible colleges or to read stories in, say, the evangelical periodical *Christian Week*, and to talk with the diverse clientele of Christian bookstores. (Lyon, 2000: 12)

Lyon's proposal suggests that popular religious voices have been neglected by Canadian researchers and his mention of "the prairie Bible colleges," in particular, connotes the disdain with which rural people and perspectives are often regarded. I do not subscribe to the "ruralism" (Bassett, 2003), pervasive across North America (and elsewhere), which depicts rural communities as cultural and intellectual backwaters. On the contrary, in situating my case study in Claresholm, I hoped both to demonstrate my high regard for the residents of small towns and to bring some complexity and nuances to confront the negative stereotypes in terms of which rural communities are often depicted. At the very least, it was my goal to provide a space in which talk *by* – rather than *about* – rural people might be heard.

Two important priorities of this case study were, thus,

1. to privilege the voices of religious Canadians over those who talk or write about them, by focusing on how individuals who either are currently, or previously have been, personally involved in "everyday religion" (Ammerman, 2007) talk their religion in a specific setting; and
2. to focus on how religious Canadians discursively construe their *own* religious identities, rather than on the "subject" positions (Althusser, 2001: 115) proposed for religious individuals by the media, academics, or organized religion (except insofar as these were taken up and/or reworked by my informants).

For, as John Biles and Humera Ibrahim (2005: 69) point out – although typically "cast as illiberal by their fellow citizens" – Christian and other denominations in Canada are characterized by considerable "internal heterogeneity." Moreover, as André Droogers (2006: 29) observes, "Believers simply do not behave in a consistent manner, despite the official, more or less homogeneous and integrated version of their religion, as represented by its religious figureheads."

In choosing to focus on Claresholm residents' religious self-categorization, I was mindful, however, of Jenkins' (2004: 19–20, emphasis original) caution that "*Identity is never unilateral*... Although people have (some) control over the signals about themselves which they send to others, we are all at a disadvantage in that we cannot ensure either their 'correct' reception or interpretation, or know with certainty how they are received or interpreted."

3.2 Generating religious talk

In embarking upon my Claresholm-based fieldwork, I followed "an initial hunch" (Bauer and Aarts, 2000: 33) that different religious identities were likely to be construed in talk, first, by individuals whose standing in relation to organized religion differed (for example, by religious leaders, laity, and non-participants); second, by individuals affiliated with different denominations. I began, therefore, by inviting participation from individuals whom I knew to be involved to differing degrees with different religious communities in Claresholm. The categories with which I began my research were quickly problematized by findings "in the field," however. The category of "religious leader," for example, quickly proved elusive. Disparate theologies and systems of church governance – as well as different staffing issues and initiatives within Claresholm's various congregations – meant that there was no single leadership model shared by all groups. Some were served by one or more paid clergy. Others combined professional and lay leadership, while still others relied solely on the efforts of lay volunteers. Consequently, I opted for a blend of "theoretical" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45), "volunteer" and "snowball" sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2000) to secure participation by individuals whose religious identities might expand upon and contrast with those already included in my case study.

Initially, like Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1992: 99), I was interested in "participants' everyday, unsolicited talk about [religion] – what they said over family dinners, in discussion in pubs, in the course of doing their ordinary jobs." Yet, focusing on such naturally-occurring data was problematic for my research in at least two respects. First, casual conversations about religion of the kind that most intrigue me – that is, those occurring outside specifically religious contexts, between friends and casual acquaintances – are not foreseeable events. Consequently, one cannot plan either to gather or to collect this kind of talk (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum, 2005: 154). Second, all talk – whether naturally-occurring or generated specifically for research purposes – is crafted contextually (Cameron, 2001). Consequently, no data can be considered neutral or unbiased. Rather, the data required for any inquiry is that which best suits the research questions posed, and analytical approaches adopted, by the researcher (Silverman, 2001).

In their study of discursive constructions of national identity, for example, Ruth Wodak *et al.* (1999: 187–88) chose both to *gather* such "public" data as media texts and speeches by political élites, and to *generate* "semi-public" and "quasi-private" data using focus groups and individual interviews, respectively. Their concern with discursive constructions of identity, rather than identity *per se*, obviated reliance on naturally-occurring talk – and my Claresholm-based research follows their lead. Given the interpersonal focus of my inquiry, however, I chose to generate religious talk via

1. individual, qualitative interviews, and
2. "group discussions," or focus groups in which the participants "have relationships which pre-exist the research setting" (Green and Hart, 1999: 21).

Talk produced in both of these settings has been found to resemble ordinary conversation in various ways (for a discussion of which, see Abell and Myers, 2008: 147; Myers and Macnaughten, 1999: 175). Focus groups, in particular, generate significant amounts of spontaneous talk (Milroy, 1987: 28) which is lively, complex and unpredictable (Myers and Macnaughten, 1999: 174). They also feature a wide range of discursive practices (e.g. "storytelling, joking, arguing, boasting, teasing, persuasion, challenge, and disagreement" [Wilkinson, 2004: 180]), including practices "specific to the particular (research) context" (2004: 188), such as posing complex questions (Puchta and Potter, 1999) and proffering opinions (Myers, 1998).

One unique characteristic of *discussion groups*, however, arises from the fact that pre-existing groups "are, after all, the networks in which people might normally discuss (or evade) the sorts of issues likely to be raised in the research session" (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 8–9).This means that – although discussions undertaken in a research setting should never be taken to represent unproblematically the kind of conversations that occur in naturalistic settings (Green and Hart, 1999: 24) – discussion group data is useful for exploring the discursive construal of collective or shared identities, because it tends to display pre-existing group norms concerning "acceptable" talk about the topic(s) at hand. It is possible, however, that certain voices "may be silenced...when working with 'captive populations' where research participants have on-going social relations which may be compromised by public discourse" (Michell, 1999: 36). Lynn Michell (1999: 37) describes the "enclosed social context of the school" as one in which discussion group participants "cannot leave the research encounter behind for their separate lives"– and this description applies equally well to the rural setting in which I conducted my own research. I chose, therefore, to combine discussion groups with individual interviews, so as to increase the chance that voices which might be marginalized in a group context would still have the potential to be heard.

In total, I conducted 30 individual interviews and two interviews with married couples. Participants included all but one of Claresholm's professional clergy, lay people from each of its churches, one person whose religious tradition was not represented institutionally in Claresholm, and three individuals who professed no religious affiliation. I also conducted two group discussions with:

1. three members of a Baptist youth group (two male and one female, in school grades nine and ten) and their two (male) leaders; and
2. six adult members of the LDS Church's Women's Relief Society (aged from approximately mid-thirties to mid-sixties).

The individual interviews took place in my informants' homes, churches, workplaces, or in a booth at one of Claresholm's cafés – as was most convenient for each participant – each lasting approximately one hour. The discussion groups were also scheduled for the participants' convenience, taking place in the churches with which each group was connected. In both cases, I was assisted by group leaders, who recruited participants, scheduled meeting times, and co-ordinated venues on my behalf. All interviews and discussion groups were loosely structured around topic guides designed to stimulate my informants' discussion of religion and social issues – rather than imposing my own categories, language, or understandings – and were digitally sound-recorded and later transcribed using a simplified version of the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (as listed in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

4 The Challenge of Selecting Appropriate Linguistic Methods

In addition to the methodological concerns mentioned in the previous section, this case study posed a further methodological challenge, namely that of selecting linguistic approaches that are appropriate to the investigation of religious identity. I addressed this challenge in the following manner.

First, my interest in "everyday" interpersonal communication about religion led me to the study of "talk-in-interaction" (Schegloff, 1987: 207), rather than written or monologic spoken texts. This orientation invites (but does not necessitate) a Conversation Analytic (CA) approach (Titscher *et al.*, 2000). As one "whose central impulse is critical" (Schegloff, 1999a: 580), however, I was less concerned with how "conversationalists...produce the orderliness of...talk" (Cameron, 2001: 49) – which is arguably the central task of Conversation Analysis (Peräkylä, 2004) – than with "describ[ing] the world...and apply[ing] scholarly findings in the solution of practical problems" (Johnstone, 2008: 27). This latter task is the purview of

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and I therefore initially planned to use Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach in the present study, because it combines "serious formal [linguistic] analysis" (Schegloff, 1999a: 580) with social critique.

In the course of conducting my field research, however, I became increasingly sensitive to the caution with which several of my informants approached the prospect of discussing religion. In consequence, I also became increasingly persuaded of the value of suspending critique, as far as possible, so as to encourage participation in my research and to encounter my informants' religious talk on "*its own terms*" (Schegloff, 1997: 171, emphasis original). I therefore opted not to pursue a Critical Discourse Analysis of my informants' talk. However, I did not subscribe in this study to the Conversation Analytic project of "unmotivated observation" of data (Schegloff, 1999a: 577) – for the object of my inquiry was quite clearly "predefined" (Peräkylä, 2004: 170). Nor did I wish to neglect the "content" (Antaki, 1998: 76) of my informants' talk, focusing only on its form. This study therefore draws on aspects of both CA and CDA, without adhering fully to either approach.

Second, my focus on how individuals identify themselves in terms of religion led me to use Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Eglin and Hester, 2003; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Hester and Francis, 2000; Lepper, 2000; Silverman, 1998; Watson, 1997), which is a Conversation Analytic tool designed to investigate the selection of "terms for referring to persons" and the processes involved in "understanding those terms" (Schegloff, 2007: 463). As such, MCA prioritizes what "*the parties to the interaction being examined*...demonstrably orient to as relevant (as best we can establish it, to be sure)" (Schegloff, 1999a: 579, emphasis original) – which is precisely what I believe scholarly and media commentators on religion often fail to do.

Thus my decision to use MCA in the present study was made *because* (and not *in spite*) of my critical perspective – although this may seem paradoxical, given the uneasy relationship between CA and CDA (as depicted in Billig, 1999a and b; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998). Yet, Anssi Peräkylä (2004: 173, emphasis original) observes that CA has "*critical* potential" (see also Eggins and Slade, 1997; Kitzinger, 2000). My use of MCA in this study was proffered, not so much as a critique of my informants' talk, however, but rather as a corrective to commentaries that "deny [religious] persons their usual 'first person authority'" (Godlove Jr, 2000: 165).

Third, the recognition that religious discourses intersect with other public sphere discourses gives rise to a further question, namely: how do people display the relationships between their own, individual religious identities and various collective religious identities, in conversation about *matters other than religion*? My Claresholm-based case study addresses this question by drawing on both "the discourse-functional theory of stance" (Haddington, 2004: 102; see also Du Bois, 2007) and Elinor Ochs's (1992, 1993, 1996) argument that certain stances can be *indirectly constitutive* of certain social identities, within specific communities.

Stance analysis investigates "the expression of...personal point of view" (Precht, 2008: 90), including "evaluation," "affect," and "epistemicity" (Englebretson, 2007: 17). It commonly draws on Conversation Analytic tools, but might be described as agnostic concerning the debate between CA and CDA over the (in) admissibility of "distal" or "external" contextual information (Schegloff, 1992: 195). Ochs's notion that particular stances can be associated with specific social identities clearly invokes a level of context deemed inadmissible within a strict CA framework, however. Nevertheless, I chose to use this notion in the present study for two reasons. First, because I do not agree that analysts can finally escape the perspectivization of their own gaze (Wetherell, 1998). Second, because I do not believe that religious self-categorizations are typically prioritized in everyday life. On the contrary, people routinely bring to conversation a wide variety of "category knowledges" (Baker, 2004: 167), with which they "organize [their] characterizations of what [they] see or hear" (2004: 164). Consequently, I would argue that any study of religious *self*-categorization must take into account Jenkins's (2004: 19, emphasis original) observation (mentioned in Section 3.1 above) that "*Identity is never unilateral*."

I therefore allowed myself what some Conversation Analysts consider the "self-indulgence" (Schegloff, 1999a: 579) of using some of my own (and others') background knowledge of Canadian Christianity, and religion in Claresholm, to describe my informants' discursive construals of religious identity. My goal in using such information in this study was not to mount a critique of my informants' religious talk, nor to challenge the wider social structures within which religion operates either in Canada or in Claresholm. Rather, I sought thereby simply to demonstrate that religious identities can be construed in talk about matters other than religion. Consequently, my Claresholm case study includes considerably less contextual analysis than might have been provided in a CDA study, since just a very little background information was sufficient for that purpose (Johnstone, 2008: 271). Instead, it focuses on linguistic, rather than social, analysis – and, in this respect, differs from some CDA work, which has been justly critiqued for its inattention to linguistic detail (as noted by Wodak and Meyer, 2009).

Thus, my Claresholm-based case study is "an elaboration of [some of] the forms of conduct by which persons 'do' [religion]" (Schegloff, 1997: 182), which focuses on Claresholm residents' explicit mention of religious category terms, while demonstrating that Claresholm residents also "do" religion via attitudinal stance-taking on topics other than religion. This study uses two quite different linguistic approaches. Yet, I would argue that Membership Categorization Analysis and stance analysis are not incompatible, for both (i) take seriously the occasioned, dialogical nature of "talk-in-interaction" (Schegloff, 1987: 207); (ii) prioritize fine-grained linguistic analyses; and (iii) pay close attention, not only to how such talk is formulated, but also to the interactional uses to which it is put (see, for example, Du Bois, 2007; Schegloff, 2007).

Indeed, when used in combination, MCA and stance analysis arguably address each of the analytical questions posed by Wodak's (2001: 93) Discourse-Historical Approach (as set out below):

1. How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?
3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?
4. From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?
5. Are the respective utterances articulated overtly; are they intensified or mitigated?

In contrast to Wodak's approach, however, which focuses on critically examining prejudiced talk (see, for example, Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), my combination of MCA and stance analysis has the advantage of prioritizing *self*-categorization – and, thus, of encouraging participation in research on a senstitive topic. It also provides a "prognostic critique" (Wodak, 2001: 65, emphasis added) of media and other representations of religion that neglect "the myriad forms of religion in the modern world that are an integral part of everyday life for millions of people" (Davie, 2006: 139), whilst recognizing that "*Identity is never unilateral*" (Jenkins, 2004: 19–20, emphasis original).

5 The Impact of Adopting Linguistic Methods to Investigate Religious Identity

The use of discourse analytic methods – and of MCA and stance analysis, in particular – to investigate religious identity can be said to impact the results of this case study in at least three ways.

First, as I mentioned at the outset, this research is primarily concerned with religious *talk* and with the "social practice" of "talking [religious] identity" (Hadden and Lester, 1978). That is, it focuses less on whether or not Claresholm residents "are" in some way a particular religion, than on the linguistic resources with which they produce a sense of their own religious belonging and/or difference

– including how they talk about matters other than religion. Rather than claiming that Claresholm residents project specific attitudinal stances *because* they "belong" to particular religious groups, for example, or because they "have" particular religious identities, this case study argues that the ways in which Claresholm residents project various attitudinal stances can be seen both to enact and to recast recognizable religious identities, which are conventionally associated with those stances. The notion that religious identity is something to be consulted as predictive of behaviour is thus called into question.

Second, the use of discourse analytic methods challenges the conventional conceptualization of religious identity as "transportable" (Zimmerman, 1998: 90), that is, as something that might "travel with individuals across situations and [be] potentially relevant in and for any situation and in and for any spate of interaction." On the contrary, this study shows individuals owning markedly different religious identities, alternately associating with and dissociating themselves from diverse religious discourses and groups via their language choices. Indeed, the close linguistic analysis presented in this case study allows one to see how religious identities are subject to change over time (Donaldson and Jedwab, 2003: 2), not only when individuals move from one setting to another, but even within a single turn-at-talk.

Finally, my decision to focus on religious *self*-identification – using MCA and stance analysis, rather than Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach – means that the critique to emerge from this case study differs somewhat from that which I had anticipated at its inception. For, in suspending critique (as far as possible) so as to encourage participation in my research and to encounter my informants' religious talk on "*its own terms*" (Schegloff, 1997: 171, emphasis original), my analytical focus shifted from social critique to making "observations – noticings – about people's conduct in the world and the practices by which they are engendered and understood" (Schegloff, 1998: 414).

6 Conclusion

Religion is a field of human experience and endeavour which is commonly encountered both in and through language. Indeed, even relatively private, mystical forms of spirituality retain a public, discursive dimension when associated with institutionalized religion. Thus, language is arguably one of the key elements around which religious practices, identities and structures are both organized and maintained (Lincoln, 2000) – and questions of language and religion have begun to be investigated with some vigour in recent years (see, for example, Coe and Domke, 2006; Ecklund, 2005; Henery, 2003; Holt, 1996; Karaflogka, 2002; Loseke and Cavendish, 2001; Thompson, 1996; Tomlinson, 2002).

The case study I have described in this article explores how residents of a small town in rural Canada produce a sense of their own religious identities not only by using, but also by questioning, reinterpreting – even subverting – discourses associated with various Christian traditions. In doing so, it shows individuals to be not only the "animators" of pre-existing religious discourses, but also active, creative "authors" (Goffman, 1981: 144), who both craft and convey a sense of their own religious identities by drawing on and combining religious and other discourses (Ivanič, 1998: 86).

Investigating precisely *how* this is done poses several methodological challenges, however – not least of which is the task of selecting discourse analytic approaches that are well-suited to the task.

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