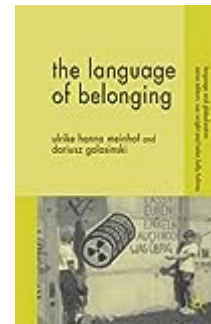


Ulrike Hanna Meinhof, Darius Galasinski. *The Language of Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 216 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-0787-5.



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Published on H-German (May, 2007)

In a world where the global reach of politics and the economy increasingly means we live in “one world,” the cultural implications of this monumental shift often get neglected.[1] Questions such as how globalization and transnational migration affect cultural diversity and identities are, however, of the utmost importance. Indeed, as the authors point out, issues of belonging and identity “represent some of the most significant challenges to social life in our time” (p. 1). Consequently, identity and selfhood have increasingly entered the social sciences as important analytical lenses that unveil wider social, political and economic processes.[2] This book contributes to the literature on how identity can become a discursive endeavor during times of social upheaval and societal transformations.

The Language of Belonging, written by two cultural studies scholars based in the United Kingdom, has three main aims: it tells the story of two border communities on the inter-German and the Polish-German border after World War II; outlines a postmodern theory of identity construction; and proposes a research methodology that can account for fluid, multi-layered, and contextually bound identities. The book’s empirical focus is on three-generation families in two “split border communities,” Guben/Gubin and Tiefengraben/Hirschberg, which have undergone traumatic experiences as a re-

sult of WWII. Guben was an all-German town until after WWII, when the allies redrew the German-Polish border at the Yalta conference. Guben was then split, creating German Guben and Polish Gubin. Tiefengraben and Hirschberg were also an integrated community until after WWII, at which time the Soviets occupied Thuringia and the United States occupied Bavaria. Subsequently, the two towns were located in different occupied zones, on increasingly strictly guarded military borders between the separate nation-states, which were eventually divided by the Iron Curtain until 1989. The study of these two towns and the way their citizens construct their cultural identities and sense of belonging are taken to exemplify border communities running from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea.

The authors use discourse analysis to examine transcribed interviews with three generations in these two communities. Their analysis points to various issues: for example, how citizens come to terms with the disappearance and discrediting of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and how this occurrence manifests itself in their narratives through discursive breaks, discontinuities and contradictions. It also suggests that for many Poles, “a good German is a dead German” (p. 160) and traces the ways in which such negative stereotypes are accounted for in various ways in their stories about Ger-

mans. Moreover, the authors note that, post-1989, the European Union as an “imagined community” (p. 179) hardly figures in their informants’ narratives. Instead, the Poles are more likely to identify with nationalist and ethnic discourses, while Germans tend to link their identity narratives to an array of local, national, and transnational discursive resources.

Besides presenting the story of these two border communities through the interviews with its citizens, the authors also propose that their data reveals the very multiplicity and fluidity of identity construction. They maintain that identities are contextual, relational, and frequently conflictual performances that rely in their content and structure on “ready-made templates” (p. 10) drawn from public and semi-public discourses such as the media, politics, and education, as well as literary and oral discourses and traditions. Here the authors set themselves explicitly against essentialist notions of identity and critique research traditions that assume that character and identity traits are fixed and stable entities about which generalizations can be made.

The contextual, conflictual, and often contradictory nature of discursive identity constructions call for new and novel methods in order to study how people construct themselves while drawing on various available social and rhetorical resources. The authors use an array of innovative methodological tools in order to do so. Photographs were used to trigger people’s memories about their communities under different political regimes and while part of different nation-states. Rather than making *a priori* assumptions about which lexica and grammatical constructions are used in “identity talk,” the authors attend to and elaborate on the interviewees’ vocabulary, grammatical constructions and categories in order to judge the relevancy of certain generic features in narratives about belonging and identity. The multi-layered responses elicited from interviewees’ support the authors’ contention that qualitative research on identities and attitudes is more effective than large-scale quantitative research projects, which are based on *a priori* assumptions about identity, for capturing the richness, complexity, and contradictory nature of “identity talk.”

Throughout the book the authors stay close to the

interview transcripts, at times at the expense of making grander theoretical and historical claims. In doing so, however, the authors fulfill the commitment of discourse analysts to finding the macro in the micro rather than speculating about possible, but arguably tenuous, connections between the two. The various chapters also contain very detailed and often lengthy transcripts, faithfully translated from their original German or Polish. While this representational style will appeal to discourse analysts, shorter, better-edited transcripts would have increased the book’s appeal to other audiences. On the other hand, no detailed information is offered on the data sample, interviewees, and interview context, except that the interviews were conducted with three-generation families including the “younger,” “middle,” and “older” generations. The data is then sampled according to these generational categorizations. Another aspect that receives relatively swift attention is the nature and content of public or semi-public discourses, such as the media and political propaganda, and how, why, and under what circumstances they are selectively taken up in everyday talk.

In the book’s conclusion, the authors emphasize the importance of using qualitative methodology for researching identities and attitudes. However, given that the book has touched on one of the most important phenomena of the twentieth century, the construction of identities during times of social transformation, a less narrow treatment of the significance and analytical importance of the language of belonging would not have been misplaced. Undoubtedly, beyond its appeal to discourse analysts, the book is also a valuable contribution to studies of social problems and experiences in border communities and speaks to the cultural implications of transnational communities in the contemporary world.

Notes

- [1]. Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (Routledge: New York, 2000).
- [2]. Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger, eds., *The Self as Project: Politics and the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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Citation: Christine Leuenberger. Review of Meinhof, Ulrike Hanna; Galasinski, Darius, *The Language of Belonging*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

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