

1 The Construction of the Subject

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, football (soccer) teams from Australia have done well for the first time in the World Cup and similar international competitions; this is a notable achievement given that this code of football has not been a mainstream sport in Australia, which has its own unique football code, Australian Rules Football, as well as the international code of rugby, and it is these latter sports which attract the greatest attendances at matches. This changed in 2006, when Australia, to the surprise and delight of most Australians, made it to the quarter finals of the soccer World Cup. I have absolutely no knowledge of this particular code and have little interest in it, but I happened to be in Buenos Aires when the match which put Australia into the quarter finals was being played. On the television in my hotel room, I happened to see Harry Kewell score the crucial goal that tied the match against Croatia, which meant that the Australian team had qualified for the next round. To my amazement I found my eyes filling with tears – I was intensely proud to be an Australian. My experience felt very personal, and clearly very emotional. But what had made this moment possible? Where had this experience of national identity, my subjectivity as an Australian, come from? And what role does language play in the construction of such experiences?

This book will argue that although subjectivity is powerfully experienced as a private feeling, something lying deep inside us, its origins lie outside us, in the social world and in the discourses that circulate within it. It will draw on the work of the philosophers of poststructuralism, particularly Foucault, Derrida and Butler, to conceptualize and discuss this phenomenon. In this chapter, we explore the origins of subjectivity, our sense of ourselves as members of social categories,

within the social contexts in which individuals grow up or find themselves. The chapter is more exclusively theoretical than subsequent chapters, as it introduces a number of key terms and develops the overall argument of the book. But before we begin the discussion in this chapter, we have to address the question of why we should use an awkward term like ‘subjectivity’ – what’s wrong with the more familiar term ‘identity’?

The term *identity* has been around a long time and is associated with a range of perspectives on our sense of ourselves as individual and social beings. An important strand of thought on identity draws on a philosophy of consciousness which assumes the ultimate autonomy of the individual, the idea that the individual has agency or choice over action, thought and being. This kind of thinking about identity focuses on the individual cognitive and emotional aspects of social self-awareness, and stresses human agency. From this perspective, the role of social mediation in our identities is lessened, though of course not ignored. Several other approaches to thinking about identity see it from a very different, more social perspective, and much valuable work on identity in applied linguistics has been conducted from this social perspective in the last several decades. This book, however, will introduce and focus on social approaches to identity drawing on the intellectual tradition of poststructuralism. Here, the preferred term for thinking about identity is *subjectivity*, which focuses on social mediation in identity formation in a particular way. The term draws on the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault: subjectivity is associated with his notions of *discourse*, *power* and the *visibility of subjects*, which we will consider in detail in this chapter. This conceptual framework will also be drawn upon in subsequent chapters looking at subjectivity in terms of such further categories as gender and sexuality, ethnicity, race and so on. The emphasis on the location of our sense of ourselves in the social world, rather than arising internally, raises the vexed question of individual agency, given the power of discourse in shaping the subject. We will outline this issue in the current chapter, and later return to it in more detail. We will sometimes, for convenience, use the more familiar term identity interchangeably with subjectivity throughout the book, but the emphasis throughout will be on poststructuralist accounts of the subject. Later in this chapter, and elsewhere in this book, we will contrast poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity with other more modernist social approaches to identity.

1.2 SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUBJECT IN POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84) offers a powerful critique of the notion of the autonomous subject. The tradition of the ‘autonomous subject’ goes back many centuries in Western thought. Descartes (1596–1650), the philosopher of the rational subject, summed up this perspective in his famous dictum: *Cogito, ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’): identity resides in consciousness. The German philosopher of the Enlightenment Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that the ethical subject uses reason to transcend cultural norms and to discover absolute moral truth. In this tradition of decontextualized individualism, reason is privileged over other human capacities. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the questioning of this Enlightenment view of the rational subject. For the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900),

Consciousness was an *effect* rather than a *cause* . . . Reason is not so much a quality or attribute of the mind as the result of political or coercive struggles between various competing perspectives, in which one gains a (provisional, temporary, historical) dominance. (Grosz, 1990, p. 1)

Foucault was strongly influenced by Nietzsche’s emphasis on the social and historical origins of beliefs and understanding. Three fundamental concepts in Foucault are central to his thought: *Discourse*, *Subjectivity* / *The subject*, and *Power/Knowledge*.

Let us first examine the term *Discourse*. Stuart Hall defines this as follows: ‘A group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment’ (Hall, 1997, p. 44). The word ‘statements’ here does not refer to specifically worded utterances, but to propositions, ideas or concepts; a received way of thinking about or talking about a subject or topic; ‘what people say’ about a topic – including what ‘experts’ say. In discourse, reality is represented – talked about, understood, reasoned about – in a particular way at a particular time. In this sense, discourses define the ‘objects’ of our knowledge – but more: they *produce* those very objects. The emphasis is not on ‘objective’ knowledge of the world but on people’s representations of the world which, in the case of ‘knowledge’ about groups of people (one’s own group or those of others) may bear little relationship to other people’s perceptions of the same groups. In particular, outsiders and insiders may have very different representations of

a group. This will be very important when we come to examine discourses determining our perceptions of ethnic and racial groups other than our own – the ‘knowledge’ that is available from the discourse in the way the group is represented may be far from the lived experience of the group itself.

Note in passing that it is important not to confuse the use of the term discourse in Foucault’s work with the use of the term discourse familiar within linguistics, particularly within pragmatics. James Gee (2015) distinguishes Foucault’s use, which he calls ‘big D Discourse’ (grammatically both a non-count and countable noun, so that we can speak of discourses in the plural), from ‘small d discourse’ in linguistics, the study of the use of language in context (a non-count noun). While discourse analysis of the type familiar in linguistics will be an indispensable tool for studying the role of ‘big D Discourse’ in the construction of subjectivity, as we shall see in later chapters, it is in principle independent of the study of discourses in the Foucauldian sense.

The reference to history in Hall’s definition of discourse is also important. Discourses change over historical time and reveal abrupt shifts and discontinuities. Foucault did not believe in any simple linear notion of human progress; given that he was writing in the period of a century which had seen appalling examples of brutality and violence in the colonial project, and most starkly in the Holocaust, perpetrated by the supposedly most ‘advanced’ civilizations in the world, his scepticism about ‘progress’ is hardly surprising. Instead, he sees arbitrary and sometimes abrupt shifts in ways of talking about and thinking about aspects of reality, particularly social reality: discourses change and new discourses emerge. In a series of lectures and books, Foucault traced the emergence of various discourses historically. The ‘archaeology’ of a number of important discourses of modernity is examined: the discourse of *madness* in *Folie et déraison* (*Madness and Civilization*) (Foucault, 1967), the discourse of *medicine* in *Naissance de la clinique* (*Birth of the Clinic*) (Foucault, 1973), the discourse of *punishment* in *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*) (Foucault, 1977) and the discourse of *sexuality* in *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*) (Foucault, 1978).

We can illustrate what Foucault means by discourse, its contingency and its historical shifts, by looking at discourses of *nation*, with which this chapter began. We will also see the role played by language and the discipline of linguistics itself in the changing character of this discourse.

1.3 LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSES OF THE NATION

In a justly famous discussion, Anderson (1991) defines nations as ‘imagined communities’: ‘[A nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (p. 6). The community is ‘imagined’, according to Anderson, in the sense that ‘members will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. I remember how moved I was *as an Australian* when Cathy Freeman, an Australian Aboriginal athlete, won a gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics (I have never met her, or anyone who knows her). The community of the nation is ‘limited’ in that it has boundaries, and its membership, the fellow-members with whom a person feels an affinity, is limited to those within the boundaries. Nations have borders; I would not have been so moved if an indigenous person from another country had won the medal. As a person from within the same nation’s borders, an imagined association with Cathy Freeman existed. The community of the nation is also ‘sovereign’, in that the location of sovereignty in earlier periods in transnational dynastic realms was destroyed by the forces of revolution and enlightenment, and the nation-state became sovereign. Anderson also points out that regardless of actual inequality within nations and the exploitation of some members by others (Aboriginal Australians are among the most socially disadvantaged), the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship: stark, even grotesque, differences in the living conditions of members of the community are elided. Anderson notes poignantly that ‘millions have been prepared to die for this limited imagining’ in going to fight for their country.

Language, and the academic study of language (known prior to the twentieth century as philology), played a fundamental role in the emergence of discourses of the nation and nationalism. Prior to the modern era, the vernacular languages were largely spoken, and in written form were the preserve of scholars; they lacked the status and the functionality to take on the role of the languages of nation-states, a role which they were subsequently to play. In pre-modern times, the imagined community, and hence the focus of identification, was not the nation but the transnational empire (the Holy Roman Empire) or transnational religious community (Islam, Christendom). The latter communities were imaginable through the medium of a sacred language and a written script (Latin, Pali, Arabic, Chinese). In Europe, the Protestant Reformation saw the publication of sacred texts in vernacular languages to make them more accessible to

ordinary people; this also coincided with the emergence of printing. Twenty million books had been printed by 1500; this figure had grown tenfold, to 200 million, by 1600. The variety of the vernacular chosen for the translation of texts and their subsequent publication and widespread distribution gave it an elevated status and led to a great stability and consistency in the form of the language. Moreover, those who read the published texts could now imagine themselves as having something in common with other readers of the same language, thus offering the possibility of identification well beyond local geographical and dialect boundaries. In this way, print languages laid the basis for national consciousness.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of strong national identities and nationalist movements in many countries in Europe. Anderson argues that as other nations, inspired by the French Revolutionary idea that sovereignty lies in the nation, rather than in the ruler, copied the blueprint of nation from the French Revolution, the national print languages played a central ideological and political role in these developments. In addition, linguistic research played a key role: the creation of dictionaries and grammars, and historical research, led to a change in the status of vernacular languages at the expense of older languages.

By the end of the eighteenth century, German romanticism was articulating the idea of a powerful connection between a language shared among speakers and the political entity of the nation. Among the first to voice the ideology of the mother tongue and its role in national identity was the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), who wrote in 1783, in his *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*:

Has a nationality anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, history, religion and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good ... with language is created the heart of a people. Every people ... has its national culture as well as its language (*jedes Volk ... hat seine Nationalbildung wie seine Sprache*) (Cited in Fishman, 1972, p. 143)

A further articulation of the ideology of the mother tongue is found a generation later in the work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (*Addresses to the German Nation*) of 1807/8, following the defeat of Prussian forces by Napoleon's army at the battle of Jena in 1806 (Fichte, 1808/1922). In the first formulation of the concept of the ethnic nation, Fichte claimed that language

founded the national idea: it is from ‘the natural generating strength of language’ that the nation is formed. A third formulation of the ideology of the mother tongue and its link to the nation is found in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). For him, too, language was seen as defining national identity. In his great work *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (1836/1999), Humboldt argued that the purpose of the comparative study of languages (comparative philology) is to show that ‘language is connected with the shaping of the nation’s mental power’. The ‘mental individuality of a people and the shape of its language are so intimately fused with one another’ that though we ‘may separate intellectuality and language, no such division in fact exists’. Whatever the source of language, Humboldt concludes that language is the ‘outer appearance of the spirit of a people’. Humboldt also felt that as languages differed in complexity, so the intellectual capacity of the people who spoke them would differ, with some languages being more advanced than others. We can see here the slippery slope between the idea of the nation as founded on language and language as defining a people’s character, and its innate superiority. Christopher Hutton, in his book *Linguistics and the Third Reich*, argues that ‘The Herder-Humboldt vision of language was an integral part of linguistics under National Socialism’ (Hutton, 1999, p. 287), where the discourse of nation, language and people had lethal consequences.

1.4 DISCOURSE AND SUBJECTIVITY: FOUCAULT’S DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH

In the discourses Foucault examined, similar shifts in conceptualization are identified. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) traces the emergence of a new, ‘modern’ discourse on punishment in the course of the eighteenth century. Prior to that time, punishment was primarily physical, and often extreme. The book opens with a gruesome account of the punishment of an attempted regicide in eighteenth-century France. As the crime involved an attack on the body of the king, and hence on the body of the state itself – the king embodied the state – so it was felt appropriate that the punishment should involve the body of the criminal; and given the severity of the crime, so the physical punishment should be severe – tearing of limbs from the body, inflicting extreme injury and so on. A similar type of punishment was meted out on Túpac Amaru, the Inca leader of a long

insurrection against the colonial rule of Spain in Peru; when he was finally defeated, his punishment involved similarly extreme measures (Pigna, 2005). In the course of the eighteenth century, a change in thinking about crime and punishment occurred, which saw a retreat from such punishments, which were now seen as barbaric and cruel. The modern discourse which replaced the old saw the goal of punishment as the reform of prisoners by shaping their consciousness; as Foucault puts it, it was the soul of the offender, not the body, which was the target of punishment. Part of the changed system of punishment involved the principle of surveillance. Here Foucault refers to the new designs for model prisons proposed at the end of the eighteenth century by the British utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham. The principle of these new prisons was that control of prisoners should be achieved by keeping them under perpetual surveillance by the prison authorities, in other words by making them permanently 'visible'. How could this be achieved without a tremendous cost in terms of the employment of guards? Bentham found a solution by suggesting that the prison be designed in such a way that it operated as a panopticon – that all the cells should be visible to the warder from a single point. This involved, for example, building circular prisons, with the cells facing a common central point, from where a guard could look into any of the cells at will (the walls of the cells on the side facing the warder would consist of bars only, allowing a view into the cells). Other designs were possible: for example, at Port Arthur in Tasmania, Australia, a model prison had individual cells along a corridor along which a warder could walk, with slits in the heavy wooden cell doors through which he could see the prisoner inside if he wished. Even in the chapel, the prisoners were constantly visible: placed in individual cell-like pews, which permitted them to look out at the preacher, but not at anything else, they could not see the prisoners on either side of them. The system in model prisons was very efficient in terms of the level of staffing required for the surveillance to be effective: at any moment, a warder if he so desired could see into a cell. Not that all cells were actually looked at all the time; the point was to introduce uncertainty in the prisoner's mind as to whether he/she was being observed at that moment or not. The result of this system was that all the prisoners were permanently conscious that at any moment they might be being observed, that their behaviour was visible; this consciousness of their visibility was enough to discipline their behaviour and make them docile. The prisoners internalized the sense of being observed even when they were not. Model prisons were built at Pentonville in London and in other parts of the

world, including the United States and Australia.¹ The goal of the system was, in Foucault's words (1977, p. 187),

to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power . . .

Disciplinary power . . . is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them.

Foucault noted that other modern institutions, for example educational systems and bureaucracies, imitated the techniques of discipline of the prison; in them direct visual surveillance is paralleled by observation, but also replaced or supplemented by examination and record-keeping: 'The examination is the technique by which power . . . holds [its subjects] in a mechanism of objectification' (Foucault, 1977, p. 187).

The consciousness induced in such systems is the key to Foucault's notion of subjectivity. It is a consciousness of being seen, of our visibility, of our appearance to others. This consciousness internalizes in us the sense of the power of the other as fundamental to our sense of ourselves. A kind of alienation of consciousness, a subjective sense of ourselves originating from without, is central to Foucault's idea of the subject. This is one of the double meanings of the word 'subject' in Foucault's work: the sense of being *subject to* a form of social power.

1.5 DISCOURSE AND THE RECOGNITION OF THE SUBJECT

The figure of literal social surveillance in the panopticon is extended in Foucault's discussion to explain the operation of *discourse* as achieving the same effect of visibility: it produces subjects. Discourses construct the terms in which each of us is seen, because discourses offer us ways of seeing each other as belonging or not belonging to the social categories which are the very subject of the discourse. Discourses offer terms of recognition of Self and Other – the terms in which we are socially visible to each other – visible as particular types of subject.

¹ The prison at Port Arthur in Tasmania was remarkably effective at 'reforming' previously violent and intractable prisoners but was subsequently abandoned, as the system induced madness in many of the prisoners, so that an asylum had to be built to house them, thus reversing the savings that the new system had initially achieved.

This is because discourses are frequently *about* subjects. Here the word ‘subject’ means a recognisable *type* of individual – recognizable by his or her membership of a social category with its associated assumed attitudes, behaviour, appearance, values, and, important in the context of this book, language use. Typically, discourses have as their subject matter or topic a stigmatized social category; the discourse in fact constructs the stigma in defining what is wrong about an individual in such a category. Foucault shows how stigmatized types of subject are central to the discourses whose archaeology he traces – ‘the criminal’, ‘the hysteric’, ‘the homosexual’, ‘the madman’. A characteristic of such discourses is that the subjects so defined are seen as abnormal, ‘Other’, not ‘proper’. Discourses thus have the function of offering social vision in terms of social exclusion. In contemporary discourses, various kinds of ‘Other’ are defined – in nationalist discourses, each nation will have one or more ‘Others’ to its own national identity; in discourses of race and ethnicity, there are a range of stigmatized race or ethnic Others, varying with social context. In relation to discourses of gender, Simone de Beauvoir famously defined woman as the Other (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010).

Discourses such as these create what are called ‘subject positions’, that is, possibilities for subjectivity, possibilities for being recognized as a certain kind of subject. The French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1918–90) addressed the issue of how we come to ‘recognize’ our ‘selves’ using a concept he calls ‘interpellation’. Following Marxist tradition, he prefers to use the term ideology instead of discourse and suggests that ideology, like discourse, creates subjects. He gives a famous example of what this is like:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals . . . , or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects . . . by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. (Althusser, 1971, p. 174)

While this literal example is powerful as an image, how can discourses circulating more diffusely in social interaction be said to call subjects into being? What is the equivalent of the ‘hailing’ or interpellation in Althusser’s example? We encounter the terms of the discourses salient in the social contexts in which we live in daily interaction. Such