

*David Evans 2022:*

**Rationality and Interpretation: On the Identities of Language.**

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**Reviewed by:**

Adam Glaz,  
Maria Curie-  
Skłodowska

University [UMCS],  
Lublin, Poland

This is a peculiar, a singular book. It is relatively short and very dense in content, covering extensive ground: from Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar, through Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of a picture of reality in language, then contemporary cognitive linguistics, M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic-Functional Linguistics, structuralism and poststructuralism, sociolinguistics and discourse studies, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, Henri Bergson, Jacques Derrida and deconstruction, Charles S. Peirce's semiotics, to multilingualism in contemporary educational contexts. Several other key figures in philosophy and the history of ideas are mentioned, including Descartes, Port-Royal grammarians, John Locke, or Immanuel Kant. The leitmotif that the author weaves throughout is the notion of identity, traced from "the identity of the mind" in Universal Grammar and expanding to progressively broader circles that go beyond grammar and language to culture, narrative, one's relationship with the Other, a recognition of alterity, an expression of one's self through a voice or voices, and finally to semiotics and education.

Is this attempt successful? If the question is, is the book worth reading, the answer is unequivocally positive. Is it worth having on the shelf as a reference work – certainly. In fact, it can be treated as an expanded ency-

clopaedia entry, which only provides basic information, mentions the major names, and provides links to more extensive reading. But is it successful in what the author had planned to do? I would say, only partially, for two main reasons. Firstly, given its breadth and scope, as well as a relatively modest length, one cannot hope for it to be exhaustive in its coverage – and so it is not. Secondly, in my view, it is uneven in the quality of the argumentation, some parts being clearly better than others. The level is higher in later chapters, which may be due to the author's extensive and fruitful career in education: he seems to feel more secure and competent in his discussion of Derrida, poststructuralism, and multilingualism than of Chomsky's UG or cognitive linguistics. In what follows, I will, perhaps in a somewhat unorthodox fashion, begin by mentioning a few of the book's weaker points and then move on to its highlights.

In its early chapters, focus is placed on Chomsky's Universal Grammar, Evans' major point being that identity in the context of UG can be viewed as a matter of logic and rationality, basically a matter of the mind. Yet, it escapes the reader (or at least it has escaped myself as a reader) what exactly is meant by identity here – the notion does not seem to be clearly defined anywhere. One has to admit, however, that it does become clearer, by virtue of contrast, as we progress through other views on identity, but even then it is largely left for the reader to grasp it intuitively, rather than being unequivocally defined.

As this review appears in *LaMiCuS*, it is natural that its readers will be interested to know whether justice has been done, in the publication, to cognitive linguistics. My assessment is that this is one of the areas where Evans' work leaves some room for improvement, mainly because of a rather small number of references to key publications,<sup>1</sup> as well as a substantial number of simplifications. This seems to be a broader strategy, also applied, for better or for worse, to other approaches discussed in the book. The issues of rationality, interpretation, and identity are surveyed as if from the bird's-eye-view, in a synthetic but often simplified manner. In other words, the reader is not offered a comprehensive discussion of a given problem but a panorama, and is being encouraged in this way to explore further.

Next, as already mentioned, sometimes Evans' take on identity is elusive, as if the author were hoping that the reader will follow his or her own intuition. This is especially evident in the initial chapters of the book, where identity is approached from the logical perspective and considered to be a matter of the mind (admittedly, as we move on beyond the very structure

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<sup>1</sup> The authors referenced include Ray Jackendoff, Ronald Langacker, and George Lakoff – certainly key names, but the omission of others is glaring. To give just one example, on p. 41, in the discussion of the role of spatial perception in the use of language, one would certainly expect reference to Mark Johnson and his contribution to research on image schemas.

of language into culture, alterity, discourse, and narrative, there is more clarity to what is meant by identity, even if the issue itself remains at least just as complex). For example, while discussing Wittgenstein (Chapter 2, p. 35), the author seems to be drawing the equation mark between the use of a word and identity (“He [Wittgenstein] comes to acknowledge ... that the word has no philosophical absolute grounding, and its identity is shaped in the way it is currently being used”) or between word meaning and identity (“Wittgenstein questions who should decide what a word means, which is a question of linguistic identity”). In fact, given that one of the ideas we have inherited from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is that “the meaning of a word lies in its use”, one begins to wonder whether the incorporation of identity into this equation comes from Wittgenstein or from Evans. Even if the answer is there in the book, it lies hidden somewhere in the prose and is not easily accessible. Above all, however, it is not made clear to the reader what exactly is understood by word meaning being “a question of linguistic identity”.

Among the book’s weaknesses there is also something that one can capture with the classic saying: *medice, cura te ipsum*. On p. 45, Evans makes a didactic point that explaining the meaning of a word (in this case specifically the word *dialectic*) is more effective with the use of diagrams than through a linguistic description. And yet, while claiming this, the author offers us... a description of the diagram, rather than producing the actual diagram! It only remains to be speculated what the causes of this peculiar state of affairs are: have any restrictions on the part of the publisher been involved or is it just poor judgement? At the end of the day, the net result is counterproductive: one does not believe a car dealer who praises the quality of “his” model and yet drives a vehicle of a different make.

Which aspects of the book, then, make it worthy of attention? As already mentioned, the discussion of identity becomes more convincing, lively, and simply enjoyable from more or less Chapter 5 onwards, where the front stage is given to such recurrent motifs as discourse, intersubjectivity, or narrative – in short, where the dynamics of identity is understood not as “who one is” but “what one can do and say” (p. 93). This is then smoothly developed into a discussion of complex, hybrid identities in multilingual and educational contexts. Indeed, the final sections of the book leave the reader wanting for more.

While developing his discussion of identity building, Evans very skillfully plays with the tension between sameness and difference, a motif that he traces across several authors who had struggled with capturing and maintaining a balance between these opposing forces of identity construction. An inquisitive and cognitively-minded reader might be intrigued here by the possibility of analogizing between Evans’ observations and the fundamental

cognitive mechanisms of perceiving and mentally underscoring similarity or difference, responsible, again, for the process of category construction. Might *Rationality and Interpretation* perhaps offer insights into the intricacies of prototype theory, the basic level of categorization, or the fuzziness of categorial boundaries? Those are thought-provoking questions that call for systematic inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one should appreciate the author's ability to weave a thread of a motif throughout the entire book – this is what the reader is offered with respect to another pair of identity-building forces: centripetal and centrifugal, acting on the one hand on the very logical structure of language and on the other hand expanding from within that logical core onto contextual, cultural, narrative, discursive, and multilingual domains.

As it is a survey of complex and multidimensional issues, Evans' work can also be potentially inspirational in a few other respects, even if it might be considered somewhat lacking in depth or precision. Let me mention three such areas.

First, on pp. 52–54, Evans is touching upon what has become known as linguistic worldview, even if he is not using this term. Again, one can easily suggest ways of improvement to this fragment. A more reliable account would certainly require a more careful consideration of the role Evans attributes to speakers; cf. e.g.: “the user uses language to interpret his/her own vision and perception of the world”, or: “identity rests with the user in how he or she construes the world through language” (p. 53). Shortcut statements like those beg several questions concerning (i) the relationship between the individual speaker and speech community, (ii) the degree and nature of the agency of speakers in relation to the power of language as such, (iii) the nature of perception (*vs.* conception/conceptualization), (iv) the intended understanding of what it means to “construe” the world, and others. One would certainly hope that in future publications the author will develop these points in the broader context of his main interest, the notion of identity.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in his discussion of the relationship between grammar and lexis (p. 24), the author seems to subscribe to the view that the grammatical “vehicle” (logically) precedes the lexical “content”. It would be interesting, however, to explore this idea in comparison with and in the context of cognitive ethnolinguistics (Bartmiński 2009), where lexis is taken to enjoy a privileged position in coding the cultural experience of a community. Incidentally, one wonders whose view Evans actually subscribes to. It is implied on p. 24 that this is the position of Barry Lee (2011); however, Lee is the editor of the book

2 In particular, it would be fascinating to consider whether and how Evans' account of sameness and difference in philosophical and narrative contexts relates to the idea of reciprocally balanced degrees of attention to similarity and difference, taken as category-building cognitions in MacLaury's Vantage Theory (cf. MacLaury 1997, Glaz, Moist & Tribushinina 2013).

3 For some more in-depth discussion, cf. e.g. Grace (1987), Underhill (2011), Levisen and Waters (2017), or Glaz (2022).

being quoted (this is not indicated in Evans' reference section), and page 170 that is referenced from that volume comes in the chapter on Chomsky by John Collins (at least in the Continuum edition that I have access to, see the references below).

On pages 53-55, Evans presents a view of grammar as something that liberates us from the here and now, something that enables story-telling, projections into the past and future (with Marcel Proust as one of notable examples). Again, it would be interesting to see how the author would relate to Daniel Everett's (2008, 2012) work on the Pirahã, who (according to Everett) actually do mentally live in the present, do not tell stories about the past, but do speak a fully grammatical language (although its grammar apparently is not of the recursive type). This is a fascinating question, open to debate.

On the esthetic side, the book is very finely typeset and bound: it is a pleasure to hold in hand. However, more attention should have been paid to editorial details, some of which had slipped out of control. For example, Whorf is misspelt as Wharf on p. 17. Also the surname of the author Jeff MacSwan is misspelt, and – which makes the matter even worse – in more than one way: as McSwann on p. 26 and MacSwann in the References. Some terms, inconsistently, are either capitalized or they are not, even within one paragraph (e.g. Cognitive Linguistics/cognitive linguistics on p. 41). Indeed, the author's (or editor's) approach to capitalization can be described as cavalier, for why are the words *Language* and *Identity* capitalized (for no apparent reason) in the first line of Chapter 3 (p. 49)? Finally, it is particularly baffling why neither the author, nor the editor have noticed the discrepancy between the book's actual title and, on p. 51, what Evans wants us to believe is the title of his own book but in fact is not (*Language and Identity: Rationality and Interpretation*). Is this mere inattention or negligence?

On balance, one must admit that the volume does offer an instructive and often enjoyable survey of the issue of identity across several approaches to language, culture, and society, avoiding in this way the trap of becoming imprisoned in fragmentary and excessively selective descriptions. It is a journey through a development of ideas over the course of several decades of language sciences, philosophy, and communication studies. It allows us to form a complex but basically a synthetic picture of identity in a broad and dynamic context, or rather contexts, but also dynamic in itself. At the same time, the prospective reader must be made aware that this goal is met at a certain cost to precision, comprehensiveness of bibliographical references, or accuracy of some arguments being put forward. On the whole, the publication is a valuable one, even if the reader willing to embark on this journey through approaches to identity must maintain a critical attitude to several stops along that journey.

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