Moving in, moving out and staying put: discursive constructions of nuanced religious community memberships in rural Canada

Kate Power
University of British Columbia, Canada

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in discursive constructions of religious identity (Baron, 2004; Ecklund, 2005; Kapitzke, 1995; Lambert Graham, 2005; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001), including both self- (Cheong, Halavais, & Kwon, 2008; Day, 2009; Jay, 2005; Radwan, 20006) and other- (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002; Richardson, 2004, 2009) identification. These studies suggest that, rather than being a "fixed" (Wodak, 2009, p. 58) or immutable category, religious identity is a highly situated discursive accomplishment, which is demonstrably more complex than a simple matter of belonging (or not belonging) to a particular religious community (Davie, 1994). Largely missing from these studies, however, is detailed linguistic consideration of how individuals nuance their own religious affiliation(s), including owning markedly different identities in different settings and timeframes, and simultaneously holding multiple, contradictory identities. The present study, therefore, documents how rural Canadians (i) draw on both categorization and particularization for the purpose of religious self-identification, (ii) associate with and dissociate themselves from various religious communities and discourses via their language choices, (iii) represent their own religious identities as (un)susceptible to diachronic change; and (iv) forge those identities via the discursive nexus between religious and other social discourses.

Drawing on conversational data generated in thirty two qualitative interviews and two focus groups conducted during 2004 (as part of a larger investigation into discursive constructions of religious identity), this paper challenges some common, derogatory notions of what it means to be "religious" by showing rural Canadians to be considerably more reflexive about, and self-critical of, their own religious identities (and communities) than stereotypes of religious adherents might lead one to expect.

Keywords: identity, religion, discourse.