One of the important affordances of the semiotic turn in sociolinguistics and/or linguistic anthropology has been the methodological precision with which we can now render the insights of Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) and of Erving Goffman (1922-1982) into the presentation of self and the construal/construction of others in the course of discursive interaction. In the course of interaction, how do individuals as role incumbents actualize their orientations to locations within schemata of social differentiation – the ‘categories’ of macro-social positionality – and to affiliations with norm-informed collectivities – their memberships in ‘groups’ of one or another sort? An older and certainly pre-semiotic sociolinguistics would generally see categorial positionality and group membership (imagined as independent demographic variables) as automatically entailing certain verbal and other behavioral forms (frequencies of occurrence or rates per discursive unit as dependent variables) in a straightforward, automatic indexical relationship. However, the complex tropes of identity rendered interactionally “in play” over the course of any encounter bespeak a very different semiotic at work in discourse.

We take a cue from Bakhtin, whose narratology of realist fiction grounds the authorial rhetorical effect of ‘voicing’ in the essential ‘heteroglossia’ [raznorechije] of the language community, that is, the dynamic condition of any ‘language’ as an ensemble or union of ‘registers’ emergent from a welter of indexicalities and interdiscursivities across contextualized speech genres. Indeed, as clarified by Bakhtin’s avatar V. N. Vološinov (1895-?), the authorial ‘voice’ [golos] emerges in the projective relationship between metapragmatic framing in the world of narration and the framed pragmatics of utterance in the narrated world being reported. And, seeing with Goffman that we are, in fine, the co-authors (along with our interlocutors) of our
very selves in the course of purposive discursive interaction, we are in essence indexically voicing ourselves as cued orientations to or away from normative expectations of how such-and-such kind of social being would speak/stand/dress/gesture/... so as to be strategically engaged here-and-now in a particular kind of social interaction. Such orientations-as-indexed can emerge in what we might term pragmatically ‘default’ conditions, perfectly realizing contextualized expectation; or, they can be, by degrees, not quite straightforwardly executed, feebly or exaggeratedly so, unsuccessfully, etc. They can emerge in fresh and heretofore unexpected laminations of multiple kinds and modalities of indexicals, creative of novel identities and affects. Goffman pointed this out in the somewhat analytically insufficient terms of “footing”: through the indexical mechanisms of ‘denotational text’ – how what is narratively denoted is in fact denoted – discursive interaction as ‘interactional text’ – what social action is thereby being negotiated among interlocutory parties – comes to be populated by a cast of figurations of any of Speaker(s)—Addressee(s)—[Other] Referent(s)—Auditor(s) identifiable as to social categories and groups in the immanent, if not explicitly narrated universe of sociocultural normativity with respect to which we always “narrate” – voice – the “I.”

The effect is that as discursive interaction proceeds on its spatiotemporal course from initial conditions, each newly introduced inhabitable framework of differential identity in the work of voicing diagrams in effect a pragmatic trope of frameworks already in play, thickening who – that is, what kind of persons – we come to be as interacting individuals. The categorical and group-relative framings indirectly indexed by voicing thus come to proximate here-and-now relevance in events of discursive interaction, contextualizing role incumbents with figurred identities of their own mutual interpretative creation.