LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY. LANGUAGE USE IN CONSTRUCTING HYBRID IDENTITIES

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Abstract: Language is a central feature of human identity. Simply by making "noises" with our mouths we can communicate information about gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin, thus creating a portfolio of our identities. Identity has been a focus of research in various disciplines such as psychology, linguistics and second language acquisition. However, little understanding of the fundamental relationship between identity and communication has been offered. The present research paper challenges the notion of identity in relation to language by looking at how identities are created in communication encounters. The aim of this paper is twofold: (a) to come up with an extensive view of different levels and dimensions of identity by tackling various theoretical stances and methodologies and (b) to demonstrate that theorizing identity one cannot fail to include its "subjective' aspect that is- commentaries on context, history and status of the interlocutors. The present analysis indicates that the very root of identity can be found in the process of interaction and it is not so much the community, but the communication network that defines the individual's identity.

Keywords: language, identity, linguistic consciousness, cues, self

I. Introduction

A cursory look at the existing body of specialist literature, over the years, reveals that identity is a vibrant phenomenon in many disciplines such as Applied Linguistics, Sociology, Antropology, Philosophy etc. From a wider perspective, identity is present on the lips of ordinary people and, if we are to place ourselves in the context of profound and accelerate changes that the 21st century has to offer, we can clearly see individuals and groups of communities who are searching for their identity. From a narrow perspective, identity has been looked upon as a key issue in linguistic research, or as put by Norton (1995) "identity is fundamentally asserted through communication patterns". It has held centre stage with some authors, or it has been integrated in the wider paradigm of Applied Linguistics, with others. It may be worth noting from the outset that, according to the specialist literature, there are two perspectives on studying identity: on the one hand, there is a large number of opinions emphasizing that identity is, in part, created by the self and, on the other hand, identity is thought to be created by group membership, thus it "acknowledges persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (Erikson, 1959:109 quoted in Gudykunst, 2003:209). The discussion below is centered around the relation between language use and identity, with a sharp focus on how identities are created and recreated during a talk in interaction. Premised on Weedon's (1987:21 quoted in Gudykunst, 2003:207) view that " (Language) is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed", the approach taken here is twofold: it offers an extensive view of different levels and dimensions of identity by tackling various theoretical stances and methodologies and it demonstrates that theorizing identity one cannot fail to include its "subjective' aspect that is- commentaries on context, history and status of the interlocutors.

Before embarking upon the topic at hand, it is useful to take into consideration some of the worth mentioning research results coming from the literature on this subject.

2. Identity and language use- some opening remarks

It has been suggested above that identity has been approached from a variety of vantage points, from various disciplines which have created a composite picture of its nature, thus tapping into the pool of knowledge coming from these frameworks has

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constituted a benefit. Not only the reliable quantity of data coming from theoretical and experimental research, but also, some conflicting ideas, have made this area worth exploring.

A convenient point of departure for the present paper is the very notion of "linguistic consciousness". To begin with, one sensitive point is the conceptual imprecision of the very notion of "linguistic consciousness" from one author to the other, but to put it simply, the notion itself includes the four following components: linguistic standardization, linguistic prescriptivism or correctness, language myths and language purism. All these four components not only they reflect identities, but they also reinforce each other. Firstly, the link between linguistic standardization and national identity has been intensively studied by various researchers in the course of time. In distinguishing a language from a variety, standardization is always necessary, as it will always reflect the strength of a group's national identity. One important aspect that researchers have highlighted is that standardization is a reflection of group identity. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) pointed out that groups with a strong sense of shared linguistic norms, such as a strong degree of standardization, are also "highly focused' communities is the sense that they feel a sense of common identity. (Oakes, 2001)

As a matter of fact, national identity and language standardization reinforce each other, but it is also important not to forget that standardization is not only a reflection of group identity; it is also used as an active means of reinforcing a separate national identity. (Oakes, 2001)

"The need for shared linguistic norms springs in part from pressures of functional efficiency. Suppression of variation in language will ensure communication over longer distances of space and time with a minimum of understanding. In addition, however, the needs of the group may call for a uniform language to act as a badge or symbol of group identity. (…)[t]he general point being made here is that standardization of languages arises as much from subjective pressures (group identity) as from objective ones (functional efficiency). Language serves a demarcatory as well as a communicative function. Individuals or institutions concerned with promoting the standard language in Britain and France are always insistent upon the importance of the latter function; they are more often coy about the role played by the former. " (Lodge, 1993:23-24 quoted in Oakes, 2001: 47)

Therefore, standardization can have two main reasons: it may occur automatically, for reasons of efficiency and it can also be a case of deliberate action, taken by state authorities.

It is also interesting to note that, when speaking about linguistic prescriptivism, these tendencies have been observed in many different countries. Normative and prescriptive tendencies may be triggered by a perceived threat to the identity or language in question. (the interest that the Swedish speaking minority living in Finland has towards the correct use of its language.) Another possible indicator of a strong link between language and national identity is the use of language myths. These myths may serve to claim the superiority of one language over another. Myths such as "Italian is a beautiful language" or "Arabic is a harsh language' are not founded on inherent values, so much as on cultural norms and connotations reflecting social attitudes towards the speakers of those languages.

Also, language purism is another component of the notion of "linguistic consciousness" with purism being the attempt to control where vocabulary comes from or what sources be they external or internal it will draw from. Puristic movements in linguistics change very often. However, there is a belief system formed out of several views such as the belief that there exists somewhere, perhaps, in the past, or in a particular textual tradition, a state of 'purity' that the language can aspire to, or return to. In other words, linguistic purism

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relates to the belief that words of native origin should be used instead of foreign-derived ones. (Oakes, 2001).

Furthermore, it becomes noticeably that, language, both as code and content is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) formulated the notion of "community of practice" defined as a groups "whose joint engagement in some activity of enterprise is sufficiently intensive to give rise over time to a repertoire of shared practices"(1999: 185). Within each community of practice, certain linguistic practices are understood by the members to be more appropriate than others. Speakers who embrace the identity of a particular community will engage in positive identity practices, while those who reject the identity of a particular community will engage in negative identity practices to distance themselves from it (Bucholtz, 1999 quoted in Gibson 2004). The above stated framework which takes into account the intentions of the speaker can hardly be denied, however, we do not have to neglect the role of the hearer. According to Spolsky (1999), language is not only a means for us to present our own notion of "who we are" but it is also a way for others to project onto us their own suppositions of the way we "must be". Tensions can arise when the hearer has a different understanding of the speaker's identity than the one the speakers tries to project. As well as this, when the speaker is in a position of power and can not only misinterpret the desires of the speaker but can force him to adopt a different identity.

Another notable aspect concerning identity and language use is represented by the concept of contextualization cues, concept that has constituted a significant contribution from a sociocultural perspective to the study of language use and identity. These cues relate to "any verbal sign which when processed in co-occurrence with symbolic grammatical and lexical signs serves to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretations and thereby affects how constituent messages are understood" (Gumperz, 1982:461). They also relate to various forms of speech production- the lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and paralinguistic. What cues do is to help individual interlocutors with markers for signalling and interpreting contextual hidden messages. With this in mind, we can extrapolate that individuals enter into communicative activities with others as cooperative agents, focusing on particular cues. If cues are misused or misinterpreted it is assumed to be due to lack of knowledge of specific cue meanings. One example that Gumperz (1982) gives is that of a Filipino –English doctor who, while being interrogated for the FBI agents, could not be understood properly by the American-English speaking FBI agents, as they were not familiar, thus leading to a misinterpretation. Therefore, the basic view holds that if the participants are mutually interested in the accomplishment of the interaction than their success would be a matter of shared understandings on the use of cues.

By way of contrast, Kandia (1991) argued that something other than shared knowledge of cues must account for these kinds of communicative interactions, that is the degree of willingness to accommodate to the other. Kandia (1991) suggested that individuals can intentionally use different cues in order to mislead the other, to create a lack of shared knowledge and distance themselves from each other. Also, communication may entail nonverbal, language and paralanguage components and group members can use plenty of communicative expressions. The strength of group identity can be exemplified through acts of convergence and divergence. Groups can be seen communicating their identity by adopting crowd behaviour such as shouting, protesting. This being an act of divergent communication it implies group members to feel strongly about their membership, by even engaging themselves in physical confrontation.

Another aspect of identity which needs to be taken into account is the distinction between social identity and cultural identity. On the one hand, social identity references the relationship between the individual and the social world, represented through institutions

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such as families, schools, workplaces (Gumperz, 1982), cultural identity on the other hand, symbolizes the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group, who shares the same history, language and views upon the world. Situating ourselves on such grounds it is interesting to point out one sociocultural view in regards to identity, which describes the concept as dynamic and constantly changing across time and place. Not only this, but identity changes depending on the goals of the interaction and the situations in which individuals find themselves. Norton (1995) suggests that one can have multiple identity positions, and can move among these in different social contexts, making identity a process of constant negotiation and performance. We can highlight here studies on bilingualism and multilingualism and why not, multiculturalism. Having contact between different cultures and thus, different linguistic groups, leads to the formation of hybrid and complex identities. Identity is ever-present in multilingualism and multiculturalism practices. The notion of transition can be categorized as a recurring theme within the field of language learning and identity. People moving from one county to the other come to form hybrid identities, on acquiring a different language than their L1. As Kanno (2003) notes, " (…) it is possible for bilingual youths to reach a balance between two languages and cultures. The trajectories of their identities show a gradual shift from a rigid and simplistic approach, to bilingualism and biculturalism to a more sophisticated skill at negotiating belonging and control (Kanno, 2003: 135).

3. Identity and intergroup communication

Premised on Hall's view (2002:32) that "Individuals can use language to realize personal intentions that are not necessarily related to their culture group, from this view, cultural identities are like cloaks that individuals can put on or take off." I would like to show in the lines to follow how hybrid identities are formed.

Identity changes depending on the goals of the interaction and the situations in which individuals find themselves. Norton (2000) suggests that one can have multiple identity positions, and can move among these in different social contexts, making identity a process of constant negotiation and performance. We can highlight here studies on bilingualism and multilingualism and why not, multiculturalism. Having contact between different cultures and thus, different linguistic groups, leads to the formation of hybrid and complex identities. Identity is ever-present in multilingualism and multiculturalism practices. The notion of transition can be categorized as a recurring theme within the field of language learning and identity. People moving from one county to the other come to form hybrid identities, on acquiring a different language than their L1. As Kanno (2003) notes, " (…) it is possible for bilingual youths to reach a balance between two languages and cultures. The trajectories of their identities show a gradual shift from a rigid and simplistic approach, to bilingualism and biculturalism to a more sophisticated skill at negotiating belonging and control (Kanno, 2003: 135).

When one uses language, one does so as an individual with social histories. Our histories are defined in part by our membership in certain social groups such as gender, religion, race, social class. Also, we can take on particular identities ascribed to us by particular religious associations such as Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Even the geographical region in which we are born provides us with a particular group affiliation from the very first moment we are born; we assume such identities as: Italian, Chinese, Canadian, Romanian and so on. From the moment we are born we also become members of several groups and we get involved in them; we take part in activities offered by social institutions such as school, church and family (Hall, 2002)

According to Gee, 1996; Ochs,1993 (quoted in Hall, 2002:32) our values, group membership, beliefs have an important role in the development of our social identities because they define the kinds of communicative activities we can be involved in and the

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linguistic resources we should use for realizing them. They predispose us to think and feel in a particular ways and also to perceive the involvement of others in certain ways. These ways are defined in terms of expectations built up over time, through socialization into our own social group about various aspects such as what we can do and what we cannot do as members of various groups.

According to Hall (2002) in any communicative encounter, who we are and the way we are perceived by the others can mediate in important ways our individual uses and evaluations of our linguistic actions. If we are to relate to the fact that each we have multiple identities and that a particular identity becomes significant when depending on a certain activity, in communicative activities with others from different geographical regions it is likely that our national identity is more relevant than our social class for instance. To highlight, each of us has multiple social identities, but not all of our identities are always relevant.

Individuals can assert their identity through communication patterns. In this respect, language and speech are important elements of identity, the first being able to influence communication behaviours in different ways so as to achieve a desired level of social distance between the self and our interacting partners. Research on Identity management theory (IMT) has shown that although intercultural interactions involve those people with different social identities, the desire would be that of maintaining face and "suggesting" the interlocutors to forge an interpersonal relationship, thus they could become interculturally competent (Gudykunst, 2003).

One also agrees that identity is not only objective, but also subjective and it is continually negotiated. Collier 1997 (Gudykunst, 2003) states that identities emerge when messages are exchanged through persons. In this way, ethnic identities are negotiated through communication. Researchers point out that there are two conceptions of identity that may manifest themselves communicatively in different ways when identity is communicated via conflict patterns (Gudykunst, 2003). One the one hand, some individuals define themselves as members of a certain ethnic group, but they may not perceive themselves as being "typical" members of it. When in conflict, they show consideration of others' feelings and usually avoid conflict. On the other hand, other individuals highly identify with their ethnic identity and perceive themselves as typical. During a conflict, they show a high concern for both self and others. Communication may also entail nonverbal, language and paralanguage components and group members can use plenty of communicative expressions. The strength of group identity can be exemplified through acts of convergence and divergence. Groups can be seen communicating their identity by adopting crowd behaviour such as shouting, protesting. This being an act of divergent communication it implies group members to feel strongly about their membership, by even engaging themselves in physical confrontation. From a broad perspective, intercultural situations arise almost every day and, in dealing with these situations, individuals are required to draw on a wide range of cognitive, affective and behavioural resources (Gudykunst, 2003). In many intercultural interactions, individuals are not always concerned with interacting smoothly but they take bold measures to highlight their ethnic identity.

It is in this wider approach of identity and intergroup communication, that my examination will be questioned in the lines to follow. From among the different analytical frameworks put forward for the description of identity in relation to language use, I will adopt Gudykunst(2003) framework that is, stretching across the field of language and reaching such grounds as communication networks, actions and influences that might affect a person's identity.

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4. From analytical framework to data

In order to form a structured research, I decided to formulate two questions that underline the present study: a) What happens with one's identity when using several languages while exchanging information with other interlocutors? and b) What are the influences that affect a person's identity? The first research question concentrates on how language shapes a person's identity and how identity itself is constructed by language, thus allowing the speakers to have an abstract notion of the self, of who they are and how they relate to this world. The second research question looks at such influences as cultural ones, but also at the ethnic background. All these, together with their subcategories have an important influence on constructing our identity.

When gathering my corpus for the present study, I tried to vary the cultures and backgrounds of my subjects as much as possible. What I did was to gather data from ten different people of different nationalities coming from different cultural environments, with different social values, and different identities, meaning: five of them were Germans, one was Chinese, one was Russian, two were Canadian and the last was Polish. The data is collected from questionnaires which were handed in to the above ten language users, with the questionnaires being structured into two parts. In the first part of the questionnaire, each question seeks to discover the inner self of every subject by invoking such concepts as language, cultural and social values, and cultural environment, whereas in the second part of the questionnaire, the formulated questions are strictly related to the communication networks that they establish during interactions.

The results were pertinent enough and if I can stress anything, I will say that- identity and communication are mutually reinforcing. The identity is being shaped and reshaped, thus allowing the individuals to get a better understanding of who they are as individuals and how they relate to this social world. The results showed the importance of the notion of self on people, and their approach to it. This concept is an important aspect of identity negotiation. Since people categorize themselves as belonging to certain groups and not to others, it occurs constantly on a variety of levels. Once the self can pertain to some groups and be outside of others, we can say that this depends on such identity variables as cultural background, ethnicity, age, gender, class. When people speak about the self, the other notion comes easily to their minds- that is, "the other", outsiders who do not belong to their group. Throughout their lives, speakers are in a constant negotiation with the self and the other. Also, what subjects have communicated through their answers, meets somehow Hall's (2002) views, that is, they stated that their social identities influence their linguistic actions in innumerable ways, such as using language in unexpected ways, towards unexpected goals as seen in this excerpt taken from one of the questionnaires: "*I prefer to adopt a slightly different identity in order to fit in. I wouldn't say, though, that I am being false in any way. Changing for me means also understanding the other and relating to him correspondingly so when I say I adopt a different identity it means I make an effort to communicate with the other in a way that we both understand each other better."*

Also, another concluding result coming to answer the second question of my analysis is related to the influences that might affect a person's identity. The subjects felt that, once coming to live in a different environment, individuals are exposed to those social and cultural values they have no choice to avoid and; consequently become part of their identity. Acquiring the out-group's language can also communicate a type of social identity. The interviewees stated that the more they identified with their cultural group, the more likely they were to have negative feelings towards "ingroupers" who spoke the group's dominant language. As well as this, some of them felt that when trying to integrate to a certain group, the new group often accentuated their accent in order to distinguish their group membership.

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5. Discussions

Languages symbolise identities. Each group can have its own variety of language - for instance, a regional group has its own variety of language or dialect, soccer game supporters can have their own jargon- thus a sense of identity, a sense of belonging to a certain group. Through these varieties of language one can recognise the many social identities people have, meaning the expressions of identification with a social group such as "a teacher", "a golfer", "a German" depending on how many groups they identify with. They will also tend to speak differently according to which identity is dominant in a certain situation. The group can be a small one, even formed out of two persons (twins, mother and daughter) or as large as a nation, where everyone can understand the connotations in their shared language. Both groups have their own language variety and individuals can belong to many groups and speak the language varieties of each group, therefore they can speak in each group a "variety' of the same language.

Identity represents the feeling of appurtenance to a social group in which an individual shares a series of feelings with the others such as: family, language, nation, ideology, professional group and so on. Only on such grounds we can speak of national identity, linguistics identity, ethnical identity, group identity and even European identity.

As well as this, taking into consideration the idea that "speech always awes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it"(Bourdieu, 1982:352), the person who speaks and the network of social relationships cannot be interpreted separately, they are interdependent, that is, the value given to speech cannot be interpreted apart from the person who speaks and, in the same way, the person who speaks cannot be understood without taking into consideration social relations. However, what speakers need to do is to try to struggle linguistically to construct their sense of "self" during an interaction, as Weedon (1987) suggests: "Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed" (1987:21).

6. Conclusions

By way of conclusion it is important to highlight that identity is continually negotiated in the process on interaction and should to be understood from a contextual perspective. It is not so much the community but the communication network that defines the individual's identity. Empirical research has shown that the individual's speech community serves to preserve, create and perpetuate language and identity, but only under such conditions as remaining tied to ancestral, cultural and linguistic roots. Communication does not just refer to language, but actions, rules, behaviours, discrimination and labels are all communicative. In a nutshell, identity involves the personal approach- how we see ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the social one, how others see us and the structures that make up the society in which we live.

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