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Language and Identity

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Abstract

As globalization develops, demographics evolve, and the linguistic blueprint of many countries morphs, the complexity of both language and individual identity becomes more acute. Yet, despite such fluidity, language and identity remain inextricably connected. The following thesis seeks to examine this relationship by analyzing select areas of overlap. First, the topics of language and identity will be operationally defined through the lens of psychology and linguistics. The larger question—how language is used as an expression of individual identity—will then be explored in relation to the topics of code-switching, dialect, and how self-perceived language proficiency is used to affirm or deny cultural affiliation. What then follows are points of contention. That is, neither languages nor identities enjoy similar social prestige; on the contrary, both are unmistakably influenced by social constructs such as power.

Because all individuals attach significance to aspects of their identity and language, the topic of this thesis is one of general interest. Beyond that, its implications are of notable importance in the study of bilingualism and the maintenance of language and identity across generations.
Part I: Defining Language and Identity

Considering its complexity and depth, language is a difficult concept to define. Indeed, this complexity allows language to be viewed in many different regards. Language, for example, is approached differently in varying contexts, such as in education, health, or politics. Duchêne (2016) seeks to establish commonality across these disciplines by defining language as a dynamic system that is predominately social. First, language invariably changes across time and situations: “[it] does not allow itself to be catalogued, classed, and ordered in the same way as geometric forms, and does not obey the same rules as the formulae of logic and algebra” (p. 10). Yet, despite such abstractness, the inherent communicative and social value of language cannot be denied: “Language, therefore, is fragile, fluid, fundamentally heterogeneous and must necessarily pursue the objectives of communication” (Duchêne, p. 11). Considering the weight of social factors in language, any attempt to divorce the two is potentially futile; instead, the relationship between language and other social considerations may be inextricable, such as in regards to identity.

Any given individual abounds with several aspects of his or her identity. Identity is defined by membership (or lack thereof) in social groups: gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Examples such as these—which are paramount to defining a person’s character—are often established at birth and remain more rigid than others, which are, in turn, adopted and potentially even disposed of throughout one’s lifetime. For example, there are situational identities, or those ascertained by one’s position in college (e.g., student, freshman), which are transient and necessarily change as an individual grows. Considering this transience, this thesis will approach the topic of identity using a perspective found within discourse analysis: “Instead of treating language user’s identity as a collection of static attributes or as some mental
construct existing prior to and independent of human actions, discourse analysts approach identity as something dynamic which is continually emerging and which identifies what a person becomes and achieves through on-going interactions with other persons and objects” (Weiyun, 2001, p. 439) This approach therefore deviates from other research on the topic of language and identity by rejecting a ‘linguistics applied’ perspective in which identity is viewed as “a set of essential characteristics unique to individuals, independent of language, and unchanging across contexts” (Hall, 2011, pp. 30-31). At first glance, this perspective may appear to muddle already murky waters; however, a view of identity as dynamic does not necessarily have to make an exploration of the topic any more arduous: Unifying the vast spectrum of identities is the fact that they all influence how an individual approaches a communicative setting. An important consideration in this respect is the role of free will in language use.

Language may indeed be one of the most appropriate methods for analyzing identity since it allows (or at least provides the opportunity for) individuals to freely express themselves within any given context. This freedom may be restricted, of course, since certain contexts rigidly require a particular use of language (such as in academic writing); however, even conformance itself speaks to certain aspects of a person’s identity. Nonetheless, given the considerable scope of both aspects, the following essay will attempt to mainly focus on individual identity rather than a group (although the latter will be discussed in terms of future implications), and mostly on culture. However, identities intertwine, and a manifestation of one identity often has considerable impact on others. Deviation, however, does appear.

Part II: Points of Agreement

One of the more salient occurrences of how language is used to express identity is through the phenomenon of code-switching, defined as “the juxtaposition within the same speech
exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or sub-systems” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59). Because people experience multiple social identities, the language used in certain contexts will invariably change from case to case. In a broad context, code-switching can encompass something as minor as using a foreign word (e.g., “I like hanging out with my amigos”). In other cases, it may be more noticeable and pronounced. Consider the following sentences: “Mis padres me dijeron that I should spend more time studying!” or “Schau doch mal, that wasn’t so bad!” In these cases, code-switching is much more apparent since it is used to form larger sentence structures. In turn, greater attachment is given to aspects of those identities as compared to code-switching for a mere couple words. Overall, code-switching can fulfill many goals, but it is a strategy often employed to distinguish between an in- and out-group. The previous examples would be uttered to a listener who understands both languages; thus, multiple languages are used to signal a mutual identification with what is more often than not the minority language (e.g., Spanish in the United States). This not only denotes a sense of community, but research widely supports the idea that code-switching expresses identity.

Code-switching is often studied within topics of bilingualism, specifically when more than one language is used to facilitate the switch. First, De Fina (2007) analyzed how ethnic identity was constructed in an Italian, all-male card playing club in Washington D.C. Specifically, de Fina observed and subsequently analyzed the interactive conversations among members, concluding that code-switching played an integral role in establishing a collective Italian identity. This was due to the Italian language (and its presence via code-switching) becoming associated with key activities in the club. For example, the club President, in addressing his cohort in writing, would conspicuously code-switch for words that related to cooking and playing cards. The leader thereby advanced the idea that such activities are inherent
to an Italian identity which, in turn, unified the entire group. Interestingly, not all of the 48 members spoke Italian. Some were second- or third-generation immigrants who had never learned Italian while others were first-generation immigrants born in Italy. Nonetheless, Italian became an important indicator of group identification for even those with a rudimentary understanding of the language. This was evidenced by the fact that such members would, upon initiation into the group, receive noticeable messages that the use of Italian was encouraged and even expected among group members (e.g., the names of certain strategic moves would be provided in Italian). Literal peer pressure to use the language was in fact so acute that new members would make attempts to repeat Italian phrases regardless of accuracy in an effort to demonstrate group affiliation.

For monolingual speakers, the same ability can be employed by using more than one dialect. Chun (2001) investigated the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by a group of Korean American males, focusing in particular on one named Jin. His and the others’ examples of code-switching were recorded during a 2-hour conversation and were found to be “predominantly lexical and thematic and intersect with the phonological, prosodic, and intonational levels of language” (p. 54). Jin’s use of language otherwise aligned more closely with Mainstream American English (MAE). Chin analyzed how “Jin and his friends negotiate their identities and jointly (re)construct the links between language and social categories,” which provides information about “the fluidity with which boundaries are symbolically crossed in everyday interaction and the multiplicity of meanings that potentially characterize such crossings” (p. 61). Chun purports that code-switching between MAE and AAVE was used in order for Jin to express group affiliation and rejection. On the one hand, AAVE allowed Jin to express his heterosexuality and masculinity. According to Chun, such an identity is of particular
importance to Korean American men who are otherwise “subject to an emasculated, and sometimes feminine, stereotype [and] are placed in an ambiguous position with regard to their male identity” (p. 58). On the other hand, AAVE was used to express a desire to resist the dominant influence of the “white man” (p. 58). This type of othering is even clearer considering the term “whitey” was used 22 times during the 2-hour conversation. Chun explains: “Jin uses the term whitey to critique the unmarked, positive, and dominant nature of whiteness, because he and his friends are, along with African Americans, ethnic Others in dominant discourses” (60).

Code-switching can therefore not only signify group belonging, but it may also express de-identification, such as with Jin and European American culture.

The two examples detailed above demonstrate the fluidity with which language and identity interact. First, the card-players weren’t just card-players: they undoubtedly had several other roles and allegiances. But in that context, they were identified as Italian, which had an observable impact on their use of language. The same can be said of Jin. Because identities are constantly in flux, so too is language. Many individuals report stories similar to Vaidehi Mujumdar, a first-generation American whose parents originate from India. Mujumdar originally avoided the use of her languages (Marathi, English and Hindi) in the process of demarking her identity; however, the scope of her identity later evolved to include an affiliation with her ethnic roots. Mujumdar now reports more freely and deliberately using code-switching to express these aspects of her character. Yet, for all of these apparent benefits to an individual, code-switching as an expression of multiple identities does not go without critique. One side of the argument claims that code-switching is, among other things, a harbinger of language deterioration. That is, code-switching is seen by some as one step in the process of language decline, in which otherwise native speakers of a particular language fail to successfully acquire or functionally use it.
Nevertheless, even in the absence of sufficient language proficiency, areas of intersection between language and identity can be found.

Edwards (2012) describes the practice of over- and under-identification of language and social affiliation:

“In Ireland, where competence in the Irish language declined dramatically in the nineteenth century, 25 per cent of the population reported themselves as Irish speakers in 1861, and this actually rose to 28 per cent in 1971, the highest percentage in a century. By 1991, the figure had increased again, to almost 35 per cent, and the latest census (2006) finds about 41 per cent self-reported speakers of Irish.” (p. 43)

Edwards note that these figures do not align since only 3 per cent of individuals in Ireland actually demonstrate a mastery of the Irish language. He and others argue that this discrepancy represents a tendency for people to merely claim knowledge of a foreign language as a means of establishing their identity, i.e. claiming belongingness to a group. Considering the strong connection between language and nationality, this tendency is not terribly startling. Edwards cites a second example to illustrate this point: “At one time, there was considerable under-reporting of Gaelic competence in Nova Scotia, due largely to the desire to deny possession of a stigmatized variety and to avoid the attentions of ‘impertinent, inquisitive and romantic’ outsiders” (pp. 43-44).

Part II: Points of Disagreement

While examples such as code-switching illustrate the extent to which language and identity positively interact, the relationship between the two is nevertheless not completely harmonious. In fact, what may at surface appear to be a synergistic relationship, i.e. one in which both parties have positive influence on another, is not without problems. The following explanation will help to illustrate points of contention.
First, Chun mentions in her study that code-switching in the case of Jin and his friends may be evidence of language appropriation, or the use of another individuals’ language and identity without fully understanding the social and historical situations those individuals face. That is, language itself is often used to represent a particular culture or demographic group, such as in the use of African American Vernacular English; however, this language is not the only representation of a particular culture. Indeed, groups share with them a common history and experience which code-switchers may not be aware of. Seen in this way, speakers like Jin may be taking only certain aspects of a particular demographic group, but not others, thereby leading to a case of cultural insensitivity, whether intentional or not. As such, code-switching may be particularly damaging to marginalized groups since it projects a false image of understanding, but actually stultifies cultural awareness.

Code-switching is also seen negatively by the general public: “Popular attitudes towards some kind of codeswitching, mixing and interference are, nevertheless, often negative, even among community members themselves who engage in this kind of multilingual behavior frequently” (Romaine, p. 526). The reasons for this discrepancy abound. First, not all languages enjoy the same social prestige, and when two languages are chosen in a particular discourse, one will inevitably be of an inferior status than the other. As a result, negative judgements are often attributable to this lower status. This may cause codes-switchers to feel inferior and socially unacceptable, rather than foster a healthy self-identity. Moreover, acts of code-switching are often associated with language decline. This is particularly true for immigrant populations, in which further generations may be unable to successfully use the language of their parents. In a similar vein, countries where English words are used frequently can also be considered. The semantic decision to use English words is in these cases often one made for the sake of prestige,
yet many locals feel that this tendency harms or at least threatens the purity of the country’s
dominant language.

Part III: Conclusion

This essay has thus far defined language and identity before discussing how the two can
intersect in many different forms and fashions. This most often occurs through code-switching,
or the intentional use of two language structures by a particular speaker. Because both language
and identity play an integral role in shaping the other, the relationship between the two may at
first glance appear to be positive; however, this essay has also shown that there are several
instances in which the interaction between the two is not as synergistic. The implications of this
research are important when considering how language can be used in school settings, politics, or
even personal use.
Works Cited


