

Language Identities - do foreign languages play a role?¹

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Abstract

In the context of the global, multicultural and multilingual world, identity issues have become of utmost importance. Whereas the applied linguistics perspective talks about a fixed, unique, singular identity, nowadays, influenced by the research in social sciences, we refer to identities which are socially and linguistically constructed.

Hall (1996), Weedon (1997), Kramsch (2001), Norton (2006), Block (2007), all contribute to the new view on cultural identities and the new perspectives brought about in the contemporary world. Identities are multiple, multifaceted, subjective, dynamic. Identity is also constructed by and through language, and learning a language comes with the construction of a new self.

These are just some of the important theoretical perspectives on identity discussion linked to the field of cultural studies and sociolinguistics, from which we want to start the discussion on the shift in identity brought about by language – a foreign language. The problem has been studied especially with reference to ESL settings, due to the multicultural and multilingual situations. Furthermore, the issue of identity in EFL classes has been discussed, the aspects investigated being: the relationship language-identity-power in multilingual societies, intercultural learning, highlighting issues of identity, or the manner with which students' identities in EFL classes were constructed through their English learning experiences. Even though, as Byram (1997) suggests the issue of identity change as a consequence of learning a foreign language has not been proven yet, it has not been intensely researched either, and it is highly speculative. We are interested in the actual state of research in order to see future possibilities.

Still, the question of how language learning influences our identities still needs answers. An interesting attempt in this respect would be a comparison of multilingual students' opinions in Vienna and Timișoara in order to identify the differences and similarities between their experiences, and the state of learning English has helped them shape international, European identities with a focus on intercultural communicative competences.

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Theoretical background

A very interesting confession on the question of language identities related to the learning of a foreign language is offered by Byram (2006), recounting the account of a primary school teacher from France who had lived and worked in Portugal for a year, learning Portuguese as a beginner:

I came home by train and when I arrived at the station in Bordeaux... I heard myself speaking as I would have done before, saying "Good morning, I wonder if you could give me some change." In other words I heard myself speaking in a way that I didn't in Portugal because I hadn't reached that level in language, that level of complexity, which I have in French. And when I heard myself speak with this kind, this level of language, *I wasn't the same person any more*, and I really felt at that moment *that in speaking a language, there are important issues of personality. Hearing myself speak French, it was no longer me, the person who had lived for eleven months in Portugal, it wasn't me speaking*. I had this French language which was part of me, but it wasn't me who was speaking. So then I lived for about two weeks re-teaching myself the French language which had left me, but the form of it was no longer the same. *For two weeks I really felt strange, just because of using the language, and the values which I had to draw from it.* (Byram, 2006: 10)

The fragment is very relevant as it brings out the personal perception (subjective, of course) that learning another language (a foreign language) brings about a change in identity. She perceives that she is not the same person any more, that she has changed and that the learning and use of a foreign language (Portuguese in this case) has produced modification within herself that she perceives but cannot name. "Issues of personality" she calls them, trying to compare the assets of French and Portuguese. A change, a transition, felt but difficult to explain. This is in fact one of the main problems in researching identity issues: subjectivity, the task of identifying the changes, perceptions, modifications is very difficult.

Identity has proved to be a shifting concept, an ambiguous one, impossible to give a sustainable definition. However, a very simple one and closer to its essence is the one given by John E. Joseph: "Your identity is who you are" (Joseph, 2004). Overtime, there have been many synonyms for identity: self, person, ethos, persona, subject, subject position, positionings, subjectivity/subjectivities, possibilities for self/hood, identify, identification (Joseph, 2004). The same concept is named and defined in different ways, which actually complement each other.

Ever since the topic has been researched, many types of identities were identified, classified, quantified. Nevertheless, the ones of interest in our study are *self/personal identity* (of any type, but with special reference to language identity) and *group identity* (the social identity that is important from our perspective as the belonging to a group of people speaking the same language and identifying themselves with the culture of that language). The third type we will consider is *constructed identity*, which is built over time, changes, and is malleable.

There were several reasons for which identity was adopted by many researchers in applied linguistics, as Block (2007) suggests. The first one would be the addition of the psychological angle, which is important in explaining the way language works and the manner with which it is related to other psychological aspects, which proved to be important in education. The second one refers to the individual – social relationship, giving the benefits of a social perspective. Therefore, a combination of psychological and sociological aspects, which could offer an interdisciplinary and more complex perspective, trying to bring answers to such a difficult subject is useful.

The linguistics' perspective shows interest in language and identity since ancient times, since Aristotle and his view on language, linking the form of the language to the people who speak it. Advancing in time, the 19th century linguistics was dominated by Saussure's conception on the arbitrariness of language, the link between the social aspect and the identity offered through language predicated on the idea that langue/language is a social fact. The 20th century brings about another interesting hypothesis, the Sapir Whorf theory, acknowledging that a person's perception of the world is determined by the structure of the language, to which we add the applied linguistics perspective which affirms that identity is "a set of essential characteristics unique to individuals, independent of language and unchanging across contexts" (Joan Kelly Hall, 2012); therefore, fixed, static and irreversible.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which posits that an individual's identity is derived from his belonging to a group, display the sociological perspective on language identity. This is later continued by Bourdieu (1991) who correlates relations of communication to relations of symbolic power by introducing the concept of linguistic habitus which posits that language is a kind of wealth which we have the power to use. The focus is on the social form of the language that we use, which actually gives us a position in society and therefore a certain form of power.

A mixture of the two perspectives still comes from the field of applied linguistics, which tries to bring together the two, stating that individual identity is a mixture of the social and linguistic aspects (Joseph, 2004). The socio-cultural approach brings the perspective of identity, which mentions all the factors involved: social, historical, political and personal as well (Hall, 2012). Individuals have histories, they are members of a group, and they are shaped and formed by their culture (Block, 2007:12).

One of the first cultural theorists, Stuart Hall (1996) confirms that old identities are in decline, "giving rise to new identities, and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject". Therefore, there is a crisis of identity and modern identities which are de-centered, fragmented, dispersed.

A distinctive type of change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality,

ethnicity, race and nationality which gave us firm location as social individuals. These transformations are also shifting our personal identities, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable “sense of self” is sometimes called dislocation or de-centering of the subject. This set of double displacements – de-centering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves – constitutes a “crises of identity” for the individual (Hall 1996: 596-597).

Social identities are seen as connected to language, one of the views in this respect being related to “subjectivity”, in relation to the thoughts and emotions of the self, giving a new way of understanding the world, “constantly reconstituted in process each time we think and speak” (Weedon, 1997:32).

The relationship language – identity in poststructuralism is essential, one more emphasizing that language is understood with reference to social meaning. Identity is dynamic and constantly changing; it is multifaceted; “identity is constructed and constructs by language”; “identity construction must be understood with respect to larger social processes”, there is a coherent link between identity theory and classroom practice (Norton 2006: 3). Identity can be negotiated, the elements involved in this process being: gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation among others (Norton 2010).

Byram introduces the concept of identity in second / foreign language contexts. To this account Kramsch adds the cultural element; thus, enriching the perspective. The reference to ESL settings, in multicultural and multilingual situations is done by Norton (2000), Miller (2003), through the study of immigrants’ identities in English speaking countries. Kanno (2003) also brought more evidence to the fact that identities are constructed in relation to language and society, whereas Giampapa, Lamoureux (2011) investigate the relationship language-identity-power in multilingual societies, in Canada, Spain, China and the United States. In the same context, intercultural learning is a topic researched by Menard-Warwick, Heredia-Herrera, Soares Palmer (2013) on students from Chile and the United States.

However, there is not much research carried out on the topic of identity in foreign language pedagogy. Learning foreign languages in certain circumstances may be an experience of acquiring a new identity (Byram 2006), the focus is on intercultural learning and the development of intercultural communicative competence. Still, the subject is speculative, since no research has been carried out on the topic. The same author, Byram (2006) mentions the lack of studies in the area, stating that till this moment there is no evidence of the influence of the foreign language taught on learners’ identities. In the area of language learning with a focus on intercultural elements, Kramsch (2000) discusses the intercultural/cross-cultural communication, the awareness of the cultural dimension of language as social interaction and intercultural communication which deals with shifting identities.

Case study

The main question of interest for the study is the manner with which language learning influences our identities –a question which still needs answers. The case study proposed is a small one, due to the conditions possible, a comparison of multilingual students' opinions in Vienna and Timișoara, in order to identify the differences and similarities between their experiences and state if learning English has helped them shape international, European identities, with a focus on intercultural communicative competences.

The participants were 15 students at the West University of Timișoara and 15 students at the University of Vienna (Philology students). The methods employed were observation – during a workshop on cultural elements, a semi-structured questionnaire and 2 focus groups, one with students in Romania, one with students in Austria. Qualitative research has its limits but it is considered more appropriate for this type of research. The method used to interpret data was content analysis, which contributed to the identification of the main characteristics of the two groups of students.

The first question was related to the students' background, in terms of family origins and languages spoken, in order to establish whether they lived and learnt in a multicultural space, which definitely contributes to a certain attitude towards, different languages, cultures and identities. The family origins of the students in Romania were diverse, due to the multicultural space represented by the Banat region in Romania: Romanian, Serbian, Hungarian, Russian and the languages spoken were diverse, as well, divided between these learnt in family contexts and the modern languages learnt in school: Romanian, English, Hungarian, Russian, French, Spanish, German, Italian, French. The students in Austria had less various family origins: Austrian, Romanian, Bulgarian and the languages spoken were also family languages, but also modern ones, learnt in school: German, English, French, Romanian, Spanish, Italian Portuguese, Russian, Norwegian. Both groups had diverse origins and spoke a multitude of languages. However, within the group of students in Austria the languages spoken (chosen to be studied in school, as well) were more diverse and more difficult - e.g. Russian and Norwegian.

Table 1. Family origins and languages spoken by students

Students in Romania	Students in Austria
Family origins – Romanian, Serbian, Hungarian, Russian;	Family origins – Austrian, Romanian, Bulgarian;
Languages spoken - Romanian, English, Hungarian, Russian, French, Spanish, German, Italian, French.	Languages spoken - German, English, French, Romanian, Spanish, Italian Portuguese, Russian, and Norwegian.

The next issue researched referred to the advantages of speaking several languages. Their final list consisted of a mixture of linguistic and cultural competences as well as real-life skills with a clear and pragmatic focus.

Table 2. Advantages of speaking foreign languages / English

Students in Romania	Students in Austria
development of linguistic competences; speaking an international language; communication, talking to people of a different nationality; cultural awareness, understanding of a different culture; intrapersonal and interpersonal competences; finding a job; opportunities to travel.	speaking an international language, a lingua franca; the capacity to understand better people; the ability to understand another culture; cultural awareness; empathy; developing social skills; diversity communication; intercultural competences; the possibility to study abroad; useful in the workplace; the possibility to travel.

The description of their identity was also of great interest, the elements mentioned being integrated in 3 categories: personal elements, regional/national and European ones. The two groups were quite similar when addressing personal qualities. They have also mentioned elements regarding their regional and national identity, but only the group of students in Austria has mentioned elements related to multiculturalism and also Europeaness. An interesting element was the mentioning of gender issues, perceived as an integral part of their identity.

Table 3. Description of students' identities

Students in Romania	Students in Austria
personal qualities: capacity to communicate, perseverance, optimism, courage, sincerity, openness etc. regional identity – Banat; cultural identity – Romanian, associated mostly with traditions.	personal qualities – creativity, politeness, sincerity, honesty, tolerance; Austrian Romanian culture; also European; multiculturalism; sexual, gender identity, plural identity.

In terms of Europeanness, the values mentioned are listed below. The answers revealed the focus of students in Romania on Europe, as their answers were more complex and brought about more details about the European space. Whereas students in Romania mentioned traditions, religion being part of what was defined as European influence, students in Austria looked at Europeanness in terms of general values, as those described in European documents, mentioning multiculturalism, humanism, diversity.

Table 4: Students' perceptions of Europeanness

Students in Romania	Students in Austria
values, understanding; traditions of the European culture, the common origins of culture / languages; religion; Romania perceived as part of Europe; multiculturalism; the influence of school in developing Europeanness.	traditions; multiculturalism; humanism; diversity.

Although no clear conclusion can be drawn, as the study has its limitations, given by the limited number of students and their different backgrounds (starting with families and learnt languages, at home and in school), there is a clear cut difference in the manner students relate to their identities and the influences received (again from family and school, although there may be others not taken into consideration, such as exposure to other cultures in other contexts or the influence of the media). One of the most important perceptions is the manner with which students acknowledge European values and their significance. Also, their backgrounds, the skills/competences developed as linked to language learning and their different layers of identities (what is called *multiple identities*) are interesting topics to be further explored.

Conclusion

Why are identities so important? A good answer is offered by Byram (2006), who understands the importance of this concept in relation to social issues, but also closely connected to language and with great influence on our lives:

As pointed out at the beginning, people acquire new identities and new languages or language varieties throughout life; it is a dynamic process. If they become conscious of this, they can also 'play' with their languages and identities,

deliberately shifting from one language/variety to another within the same conversation, thereby signalling a change from one identity to another.

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