

Identity and Language Learning from Post-structuralist Perspective

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Abstract—In this review of literature, some of the definitions of identity, factors contributing to its development, and its relationship with language learning are examined. The process of trying to determine the term 'identity' is complex. Many people have attempted to define the term *identity*. There is a lack of consensus among researchers on what 'identity' means, although there are many similarities among researches across different disciplines. Researchers define identity in different ways with common relationship. This review paper outlines the studies conducted by researchers in recent years in order to examine identity from the poststructuralist perspective. Finally, two recent paradigms on identity as well as different types of bilingualism are discussed in detail.

Index Terms—identity, the monocultural cognitive paradigm, the constructivism paradigm, bilingualism, subtractive identity change, additive identity change, productive identity change, hybrid identity change

I. WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Prior to discussing the relationship between language and identity, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the term 'identity' from the viewpoint of different researchers and scholars along with factors contributing to its construction. The meaning of the term identity has evolved from seeing it as a stable core self (Hall, 1996) to dynamic, contradictory, and multiple dimensions of a person (see Block, 2006, 2007a; Pavlenko, 2002). There is a lot of definitional confusion in the literature, with some authors offering multiple definitions for single terms, and other authors conflating two or more terms and using them (Menard-Warwick, 2005).

According to Ha (2008) the West and the East conceive the notion of identity differently. While Western scholars' perception of identity is considered "hybrid and multiple" (p. 64), Eastern scholars regard it as a sense of belonging. Eakin (1999) uses the term *identity* together with subject, self, and person, and defines it as "terms that seem inevitably to spin in elliptical orbits around any attempt to conceptualize human beings" (p.9).

Wu (2011) argues that identity is the way we view ourselves and are viewed by others and it is inextricably tied to the social contexts out of which it arises. It is, furthermore, constructed through a mixture of social practices in which individuals are involved in their daily lives. Identity, as Ige (2010) puts it, is unarguably a reflection of the various ways in which people understand themselves in relation to others. Identity is sometimes considered as synonymous with ideology. However, identity is not merely ideology; rather ideology leads to identity (McAdams, 1985).

According to Norton (2000) identity refers to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Danielewics (2001) notes that identity refers to "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (p. 10). Haneda (2005), on the other hand, considers the following as elements of identity: "(a) membership in a community in which people define who they are by the familiar and the unfamiliar, (b) a learning trajectory in which they define themselves by past experiences and envisioned futures, (c) a nexus of multimembership in which people reconcile their various forms of membership into one coherent sense of self, and (d) a relation between local and glob" (p. 273).

II. IDENTITY AS BOTH A DIFFERENTIATOR AND ASSIMILATOR

Identity includes both the contradictory attempts to "differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory" (Bamberg, 2010, p. 1). In other words, when we define a certain identity for ourselves, we are in some way assimilating ourselves to a particular group or class, and at the same time, we are differentiating ourselves from others who do not belong to that group or class, although the differentiating role played by identity far outweighs its integrating one. That is why Woodward (2002) claims that identity is essentially about differentiation. There are, yet, other scholars such as Joseph (2004), who argue that the process of identity construction can be like a

sword with two edges which can both work partially against individuals and connect them together. Therefore, it has both a unifying and divisive force.

In summary, identity has three main features: "(a) sameness of a sense of self over time in the face of constant change; (b) uniqueness of the individual vis-à-vis others faced with being the same as everyone else; and (c) the construction of agency as constituted by self (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and world (with a world-to-self direction of fit)" (Bamberg, 2010, p.1).

III. IDENTITY FROM THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE: MULTIPLE AND SHIFTING

Identity has been viewed from different perspectives since the emergence of the issue in the field of applied linguistics. Traditionally it was believed to be a fixed or unitary phenomenon. Yet, recently it has been addressed and explored from a poststructuralist point of view. In a globalized, poststructuralist, postmodern world, identity is considered to be fluid, multiple, diverse, dynamic, varied, shifting, subject to change and contradictory. It is regarded to be socially organized, reorganized, constructed, co-constructed, and continually reconstructed through language and discourse. It is unstable, flexible, ongoing, negotiated, and multiple. It is indeed a collection of roles or subject positions and a mixture of individual agency and social influences (Zacharias, 2010; Omoniyi & White, 2008).

Rather than being unique, fixed and coherent, identity is considered as "a process" by social theorists (Block, 2007b). Thus, some authors (e.g., Hall, 1995), prefer to use *identification* in an attempt to imply this procession sense. For Harré (1987), identity was about the constant and ongoing engagement of individuals in interactions with others (Block, 2007). Identity, while being linguistically constructed, is thought to be 'fluid' (Pabłé Haas, & Christe, 2010).

According to the poststructuralist perspective, identity is considered as being unstated, contextually driven, and emerging within interactions of a given discourse (Miyaharay, 2010). To put it another way, not only a category or a personal characteristic, identity is actually a kind of "becoming", it is social, a learning process, a nexus, and a local-global interplay (Wenger, 1998, p. 163).

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory states that a person does not possess only one 'self', but rather several 'selves' each activated in a certain situation. In much a similar way, other researchers such as Luk and Lin (2007) believe that a person has a variety of identities within him or her, stressing on the fact that his or her identities are not predetermined, fixed and static but are "sometimes incoherent, fragmented, multiple, and conflicting" (p. 50). That is why many researchers prefer to use the term 'identities' instead of using the singular form.

Several studies (Lam, 2000; Norton, 2000; Armour, 2004; to name a few) have demonstrated the multidimensional and non-unitary essence of language learner identities. Norton (2000) made an attempt to show how one of her participants, "Martina", has several identities including a mother, a wife, an immigrant, a language learner, and a worker. Martina never felt comfortable speaking English with her identity as an immigrant and a second language learner. Nonetheless, as a mother, she had to be involved in interacting and talking with her landlord who accused her of breaking a lease agreement.

Identity concerns "negotiated experience," which means people experience different identities through their social participation and then make a choice among the identities within them (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Researchers such as Pierce (1995), McKay and Wong (1996), and Armour (2004) note that negotiating multiple identities is a site of struggle. For example, one of the participants in McKay and Wong's (1996) study was "Michael Lee" who endeavored to refuse to give in to the way he was situated as an ESL student. Michael Lee refused to write about the suggested topic of family or school, when he was asked to in a language examination. As an alternative, he chose to write about his hobbies as he felt much more comfortable with this aspect of his identity. The conclusion McKay and Wong (1996) reached was the fact that any person or any language learner experiences social negotiations within him or her in order to finally form identities he or she prefers (Zacharias, 2010).

In addition to being multiple and continually negotiating, identity especially national identity, as Puri (2004) and Smith (2003, 2004) note, is no longer regarded as a fixed concept attached to one's native land; rather, it is a continuing process, re-created daily through holding ceremonies for important and influential historical events for instance (Block, 2007). Therefore the notion of race as a way of classifying and attributing identity to people can also be questioned (Ali, 2004).

IV. IDENTITY WITH BOTH A GIVEN AND A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED ASPECT

McKenna (2004) maintains that identities consist of elements which might be given, such as one's social class, or physiologically inherited characteristics, in addition to elements of choice or agency. However, according to Miyaharay (2010), identity is not regarded by poststructuralists as a 'given or innate' feature; rather, individuals themselves must now construct who they are and they themselves should make a choice on how they want to be recognized in a certain context. Identity is regarded as a phenomenon that comes out of a mixture of what is said and done.

Identity claims are regarded as "acts" through which people construct new definitions of who they are. Such a notion is in contrast with the traditional sociolinguistic approaches that connect already determined social categories with language variables. As a substitute, identity claims now considers "the very fact of selecting from a variety of possibilities a particular variant (on a given occasion) as a way of actively symbolizing one's affiliations" (Auer 2002, p.

4 cited in De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamber, 2006). Thus, identities are not counted to be as simply symbolized in discourse, but rather as performed, carried out and manifested through a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic means (De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamber, 2006).

By reviewing studies on three perspectives, Varghese et al (2005) looked at how language teacher identity is connected to a theory, considering "identity as multiple, shifting, and in conflict; identity as crucially related to social, cultural, and political contexts; and identity being constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily through discourse" (pp. 21-44).

Pennycook (2003) even steps further by stating, "it is not that people use language varieties because of who they are, but rather that we perform who we are by (among other things) using varieties of language" (p. 528). In the process of identity construction here seems to be a tension between the impacts of the individual's own agency and the societal structure (Dewi, 2007). Cauldron and Smith (1999 in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 113) tried to elucidate the tension by providing definitions for the both concepts. He explains that the term agency denotes the 'personal dimension', whereas the term structure covers what is 'socially given' (Cauldron & Smith, 1999, in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 113). Cheek, Smith and Tropp (2002) assert that identity has four aspects: personal, social, collective and relational.

V. TWO PARADIGMS ON IDENTITY

There are now two paradigms on identity which are discussed below:

The first paradigm is called monocultural, cognitive view, according to which the individual is considered as an independent, free and self-reliant person. The second paradigm is known as the constructivism which suggests that the society plays an important role in the construction of the identity of the individuals, while human identity is counted to be partly cognitive or individualistic and partly social (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brown, 2007).

The constructivism paradigm has two theories: social identity theory which claims that identity is bipolar: social and personal (Tajfel, 1998), and cross-cultural theory according to which identity represents two ideas: independent-self and interdependent-self. (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Identity, as Berger & Luckmann (1966) put it, needs to be considered in terms of social relations and, according to Blackledge & Pavlenko (2002) as dynamic, fluid, and versatile.

VI. DIFFERENT TYPES OF BILINGUALISM

Much earlier, Lambert (1975) proposed two different types of bilingualism:

1. "subtractive"
2. and "additive."

Subtractive bilingualism refers to a situation where L2/FL is acquired to the detriment of L1, and target culture (C2) assimilation threatens to replace with values and life styles of the native culture (C1). Therefore, the native language and native cultural identity are substituted by the target language and target cultural identity.

With additive bilingualism, L1 and C1 identity are maintained while L2 and C2 identity are acquired. The two co-exist and function in different communicative situations. The learner's native language and native cultural identity are preserved while the target language and target cultural identity are acquired in addition. Therefore, the second identity is added to the first one to co-exist with one another.

Drawing on the Gao's (2010) work, Pishghadam and Sadeghi Ordoubody (2011) discuss other revisited models as follows: In the first model, "Subtractive Identity Change" (Pishghadam and Sadeghi Ordoubody, 2011, p. 150), the old identity is substituted by the new one, in the second, "Additive Identity Change" (Pishghadam and Sadeghi Ordoubody, 2011, p. 150), the new identity is added to the previous one, in the third type, "Revisited Model: Productive Identity Change" (Pishghadam and Sadeghi Ordoubody, 2011, p. 151), the two identities coexist and reinforce each other, and finally in the last model, "Hybrid Identity Change" (Pishghadam and Sadeghi Ordoubody, 2011, p. 151), different dimensions of the two identities amalgamate to form a wholly new and distinct identity which is different from both.

Gao (2010) has concluded that it is wrong to call one group as subtractive bilinguals or another group as productive bilinguals, because subtractive, additive, productive, and hybrid are not personality characteristics and individuals are not everlastingly one type of bilinguals. Consequently, bilingual/multilingual identity investigation is a dynamic process and L2/FL users may modify their directions in different moments or experiences, while experiencing subtractive or productive moments or events.

VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout the history, identity has been defined differently, although with common relationship. Among the various definitions, in spite of the confusion, there seems to be an evolutionary process. In general terms, identity can be defined as the way we understand and view ourselves in relation to the world, other people, time and space.

Identity has two contradictory features; on one hand, it can unite and assimilate individuals, making them similar to other members; on the other hand, it can divide and differentiate people, making them unique and different.

Identity has both a social and personal dimensions. As a personal dimension, on the one hand, humans are considered as agents; and agents are able to think, decide and choose. To put it other way, agency is a self-conscious process which

is required while our contradictory multiple selves are negotiating simultaneously to make a choice on which self to be activated depending on the context, place and time, in order to arrange, control and smooth the progress of realization of our interests. On the other hand, subjectivity constitutes an integral part of identity, which refers to our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. As the social dimension, identity reflects an individual's relationship with the external environment, which is reconstructed through interaction with society. By this, we mean that membership in a community constitutes the social—and actually the shifting—aspect of identity. Defining categories such as age, sex, religion, profession, region for inclusion or exclusion of self and others is indispensable for the public aspect of identity construction. The categories are called identity markers.

Therefore, identity has elements which are both A) given, innate and predetermined, such as social class or physiologically inherited characteristics; and B) constructed by desire.

Traditionally, identity was considered to be fixed, stable and unitary. However, from a Poststructuralist perspective, identity is:

1. Contextually situated in a past-present-future time frame
2. Fluid, dynamic, shifting and variant;
3. Multiple, multi-dimensional, diverse and accordingly negotiated due to having contradictory and conflicting selves, among which we make a choice.

Although multiple, identity has a core psychological self that supervises the negotiation of different selves. In other words, aspects of our identity are interrelated, and there is a coherence of one sense of self over time in spite of constant change.

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