Multilingualism and Identity
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Introduction

The term “multilingualism” is most often used to refer to a state of linguistic knowledge, environments, or speakers in relation to which a minimum of three languages are implicated. When we speak of multilingualism in this entry, however, we include the case of bilingualism, following Romaine (1995) and understanding the term “multi” to refer to “more than one.” In the Western world, multilingual scenarios are commonly taken to be exceptional, rare if not mystifying, despite the fact that multilingualism as such actually describes the reality of the majority of individuals and environments across the world, including a multitude of people in countries largely considered monolingual, such as the United States. That multilingualism abounds and is a naturally occurring inevitability is simply observable at the societal and individual level. However, the focus of the present discussion seeks to ponder what multilingualism brings to bear on the construction and performance of identity. This is the task we turn to in the remainder of this entry.

Connecting Language to Identity

Being the mode at our disposal to express our thoughts, desires, emotions, and the like, language is omnipresent. Language is unmistakably linguistic in the formal sense of the word, but it is much more at the same time. Language is one of the most reliable constructs of human society; from the time we are born we are surrounded by it and, since all communities have language, it is virtually synonymous with being human. No one has ever claimed that language exists within a vacuum; even though some linguists are uninterested in the sociological side of language, this does not entail that there is an a priori rejection on their part to the intuitive notion that language is obviously a social construct. Putting aside questions related to how language is acquired and mentally represented in a cognitive sense, which are best left to formal linguistics, the extent to which one could possibly fully understand language in the absence of conceiving how it comes to bear on society, and society on it, is limited. The notion of linguistic identity acknowledges the role that language plays in the shaping of personal and societal identities, from construction vis-à-vis linguistic negotiation to identity performance via language use. Those who study linguistic identity understand that language leaves its mark on personal identity as much as individuals leave their mark on the languages they speak (e.g., De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006). Insofar as this is true, it stands to reason that linguistic identity in multilingualism would entail even more dynamic construction and performance processes that would not—in fact could not—be unvarying or consistent precisely because multilingualism itself is a fluid concept and subject to multifarious differences specific to each instance of contact. Of course, this does not mean that there are not commonalities to be appreciated from bringing together similar or even vastly different cases of multilingualism, but is rather a proviso that one must consider the specific variables that are sure to be unique as they relate to the linguistic identity of multilingual individuals, communities, and nations (e.g., Niño-Murcia & Rothman, 2008).

Research on the concept of identity, as it relates to language and language use, is currently at the forefront of research in the field of sociolinguistics. This type of research has informed and is informed by linguistics, sociology, and anthropology as it contributes to the general knowledge of human behavior. The systematic analysis of social and linguistic
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data from environments where two or more languages coexist provides us with extremely valuable information regarding its speakers’ linguistic behavior (both at the individual and at the collective level). Critical to this form of analysis is the underlying fact that we can better appreciate some of the intricacies that govern multilingual contexts everywhere, that is, we can understand how an individual is self-positioned in such an environment and how she or he constructs social positions among others (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Questions such as what it means to be Turkish or Swedish are already tricky, if not loaded. Nevertheless, pondering what it might mean to be Turkish–Swedish in Sweden, where your reality might sit between two linguistic codes (Turkish and Swedish) and where you might not feel authentically part of either of the subcultures that contribute to the label, is likely to be more complex. To be a Turkish–Swedish, Japanese–Brazilian, Algerian–Italian, Moroccan–French, or Basque–Spanish individual in no way guarantees that your experiences, linguistic and otherwise, are truly comparable to all members of such groups; however, it might mean that there is in some way a common basis for how your identity comes to be constructed. In this case, living between two cultures, two languages, and the like calls forth separate linguistic identities that are unique from monolingual ones. Novel linguistic codes are born from such experiences most naturally, and often not out of seeming communicative necessity as is the case with typical pidginization and creolization processes. The fact that multilingual speakers can alternate between two or more languages in their speech is a valuable tool to establish in-group and out-group membership. Multilinguals are aware of their linguistic abilities and they know how their speech production differs considerably from monolinguists’. New linguistic codes that reflect the hybridity of identity in multilinguals are abundant and are often indicators of inclusion into and exclusion from multilingual groups. For example, according to Zentella (1997), Spanglish is the code of choice among Nuyoricans (people of Puerto Rican descent in New York) even when they are seemingly equally fluent in Spanish and English. In a way, such individuals are trilingual, employing the languages within their repertoire and combining them in novel yet constrained ways when appropriate, in accord with the social and linguistic prudence that each situation dictates.

In the past, identity was treated as a permanent label and it was therefore assigned to groups of individuals that shared a common set of attributes irrespective of other differences. These individuals were assigned into preexisting and predetermined categories that targeted the collectivity and left aside individual variations. More recently, the concept of identity has been redefined and the focus of attention has shifted from collective and immutable to individual and ever-changing. Therefore, linguistic identity is now seen as a personal trait in constant process of development that is relentlessly being renegotiated according to individual circumstances. In this frame, the focus has shifted from absolute finished values to the value of performativity itself (Austin, 1975; Cameron, 2001, 2005). This concept has consequences for multilingualism too. Relative preferences and affinities for language choice and use at the multilinguals’ disposal can and do change, often cyclically, and are related to external and internal influences while at the same time reflecting the fluidity of linguistic identity on a continuum of time.

Construction and Identity in Multilingualism

In a very broad sense, social identity focuses on the contrasts between “I” and “you” and between “us” and “them.” It is through the experiences we have with other people that we derive and develop our own identity and ultimately how we assign societal roles to others and ourselves. In this respect, the general use of language, as it relates to identity, and the specific linguistic choices reproduced in every speech act, are clearly never neutral.
Although mostly done subconsciously, individuals continually construct and negotiate their uniqueness to project an image of themselves. While most individuals do so following general social and linguistic patterns, others deviate from them, producing so-called “deviant” identities (Cameron, 1995, p. 16). This is especially true among multilinguals whose linguistic repertoire, as described in the previous sections, allows them to act inventively as a byproduct of different resources they uniquely have. Whether they choose to use only one language, go back and forth indiscriminately between languages, or combine languages in interesting ways, multilinguals make use of their linguistic tools with the motivation, conscious or unconscious, of accomplishing different effects. These effects may range from amiable in-group interactions to hostile rejections toward the out-group. Whatever goal from this continuum is elected, the linguistic act embodies a process of identity (re)negotiation. In this sense, individuals have choices to make that have various consequences. Electing to align with a mainstream society may convey more privileges, while the use of another language, a more stigmatized one in a given society or subpart of a greater society, may be indicative of ethnic pride, or jeopardize social acceptance in some spheres. These kinds of privileges are therefore established, revoked, or maintained via linguistic choices. As such, external stimuli become internal variables that mediate linguistic choices, which are in turn witnessed in identity performances.

Language is, therefore, seen as an essential, distinctive element of a person’s identity whether multilingual or not. It is reasonable, then, to hypothesize that the interplay of multiple linguistic codes within the mind of an individual comes to bear in non-trivial ways on the realization and maintenance of multilingual identity. Nonetheless, the amount of linguistic decisions that an individual has to make is drastically reduced by external factors such as our nationality or ethnicity, a point to which we turn in the following section.

National and Ethnic Identity

Today it is not uncommon to find political and social movements all around the world that call upon language as symbolic and inherently related to the concepts of nation, group, and identity. In the USA, for instance, the current English Only Movement has tried to make official the hegemony of the English language for decades. This debate, however, is not a new one. In fact, this association in contemporary times can be traced back to German Romanticists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, or Johann Gottfried Herder. These philosophers raised fundamental questions regarding the relationship between nation and language, indicating that these two elements are inseparable. An essential component of a nation, they hypothesized, is its language. Because we all use language and different ethnicities have different codes, language is an obvious and extremely effective vehicle that can be used to unite and divide masses. In modern history, the early and mid-part of the 20th century knew this game all too well as German, Italian, and Spanish were used in Europe as a means of defining inclusion and exclusion.

What does language’s proverbial capital mean in a postmodern era in which the process of globalization surrounds us? Now, more than ever before, people are able to travel great distances in a matter of hours or can communicate effortlessly across the world with the simple touch of a button. In this sense, globalization is forcing the disappearance of our boundaries, physical and linguistic. This globalization comes with a very substantial price tag: homogenization at several levels. At the linguistic level, the one with which we are concerned here, even if this globalization is favoring the spread of some languages and the disappearance of others, bilingualism (or multilingualism), and not monolingualism,
is prevailing all over the world, whether it is officially recognized or not (Romaine 2010, p. 26). Conversely, although the process of globalization and contact might most commonly meet with linguistic erosion, erosion itself can have the effect of rejuvenating pride in languages and their revitalization, motivating people to unite in an effort to reclaim their linguistic rights (see, e.g., Niño-Murcia, Godenzzi, & Rothman, 2008). This trend is nicely evidenced in the resurgence of regional languages and their co-official status in Spain where they were outlawed during the Franco regime in the mid-20th century.

The concept of ethnicity is seen as a subset of nationalism that gets especially promoted in contexts of intense immigration. In these contexts, the friction that appears between the members of the host community and the newcomers is translated in the creation of the so-called minority groups. At first, linguistic differences promote the boundaries between them. With time, these boundaries tend to disappear due to the partial or total integration of the minority group into the mainstream, a sign that acculturation has taken place. At this moment “ethnicity becomes a symbolic ethnicity” (Gans, 1979). Lack of active participation in linguistic exchanges, therefore, does not completely determine belonging to an in-group. This may have evolved into another type of identity available to an individual: ethnic identity.

Multilingual Education and Identity

It should not be controversial by now to acknowledge the fact that we live in a world in which multilingualism, and not monolingualism, is the norm, yet in many multilingual societies speakers do not always have access to an education that promotes such diversity. In many cases, minority languages are only the language of instruction during the first years of an individual’s education, and they are later replaced by other more prominent languages (Cenoz, 2009). In the context of globalization, the external pressure to acquire such prestigious languages, such as English, can hinder the development of languages with less prestige. This is clearly detrimental and prejudicial since it may result in a gradual language loss in the case of minority/heritage languages. Education seems to be the best weapon against this form of linguistic stagnation. In this sense, the positive outcomes of well-developed educative policies on languages are potentially manifold, as long as they become more inclusive and more receptive of multilingual and multicultural individuals. An effective use of educative policies is therefore one that recognizes the importance of language maintenance of the minority language(s) while facilitating the acquisition of other more prestigious languages. While the presence of these policies will not assure language maintenance in any community (Cenoz, 2009, p. 11), in their absence this process will most likely result in language shift toward the majority language.

The case of languages such as Basque and Catalan in Spain is a good example of how educative policies can help recover a weakening linguistic panorama, restoring pride in linguistic identities that include minority languages by officializing their importance from the top down. This nationalist view of “one nation-one language” that dominated the time of the Franco dictatorship resulted in the official barring of the languages. During that time, a strong sense of stigmatization was associated both with these languages and with their speakers. With the turn of the century, social and educative reforms have changed the panorama with the positive effect of revitalizing these languages.

While there are a few agencies that are working to increase awareness on language policies, the number is minimal. Much work is still to be done to foster a larger number of minority languages and encourage the positive view of multilingualism. Multilingual education not only motivates the acquisition of languages while protecting minority languages, it also legitimizes the existence of minority languages and promotes the sense of pride they should entail in the linguistic identity of its speakers.
Some Concluding Remarks

Whether multilingualism is an individual phenomenon or a societal one has not been clearly defined (Niño-Murcia & Rothman, 2008, p. 21), although we take it to be both. While we are clearly all individuals and function as individuals, we should not forget that we are also social beings and live in a social world. Multilingual communities can be found all around the world in different contexts. Sometimes multiple languages coexist without apparent tension, such as French, German, and Italian in Switzerland or Spanish and Catalan in Andorra. Other times, as is the case in Belgium, one language (Flemish) is relegated to informal in-group activities while another (French) has the public recognition (Myers-Scotton, 2002, p. 35). Other times, more than one language, or varieties of the same language, coexist, but one is predominantly more prestigious than the other; in the case of true diglossia, two languages coexist and are used for different purposes by the same community. Examples of diglossia abound, such as the case of heritage languages in the USA or the case of Arabic in the Middle East (Shiri, 2010). Even though the rewards of multilingualism are well documented (e.g., Coulmas, 1992; Myers-Scotton, 2002), when two or more languages coexist, there is a tendency to shift to the most prestigious language, which may result in language loss. At present, most government agencies are not taking the necessary measures to foster multilingualism. Educative and social reforms are therefore needed across the board in order to address the linguistic needs of the multilingual and multicultural society that we currently live in.

What is clear from this non-exhaustive introduction to the multiple variables inherent in the complex notion of linguistic identity in multilingualism is that the issues at stake are even more polarized, complex, and idiosyncratic in some ways than the same processes in monolingualism. Future research on linguistic identity and multilingualism is welcome and the emerging trend of specific research is sure to be insightful and enlightening on many planes.

SEE ALSO: Bilingual Education and Immigration; Code Switching; Ethnicity; Language and Globalization; Language and Identity; Language Policy and Multilingualism; Linguistic Diversity; Minority Languages in Education; Multilingualism; Multilingualism and Minority Languages

References

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Suggested Readings


