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LANGUAGES AND THE SELF

Abstract

The article looks into the meaning of concepts of L2 Self, L2 Ideal self and L2 Motivational Self Systems from the point of view of their usefulness for SLA/FLT research. Psychological and sociological terminology related to the Self, Identity, Storied Self, Social Identity and Ethnicity is then discussed as well as various types of the Self useful in the analysis of attitudes to first, second and foreign languages. Examples of linguistic decisions are offered that lead to language maintenance, language loss or changes of the dominant language. Linguistic behaviour is traced back to possible ways of presenting the Self as well as to different approaches to ethnicity, integration and assimilation. Conclusions and implications for classroom language learning and teacher education are also presented.

Keywords: the Self, identity, group identity, ethnicity, language, linguistic decisions, language learning, teacher education

Słowa kluczowe: Ja, tożsamość, tożsamość grupowa, etniczność, język, decyzje językowe, uczenie się języka, kształcenie nauczycieli

1. Introduction

The concept of the Self was introduced into language education almost two decades ago. The term *L2 Self* or *L2 Ideal Self* came to mean an individual's far-reaching linguistic aims, while the *L2 Motivational Self System* refers to the process of identifying personal goals and planning ways to achieve them (Dörnyei,

Ushioda, 2009), although the term *Self System* can also be found and replaces what used to be described as learner strategies such as submission, duplicity, rebellion or harmony (Taylor, 2013).

L2 Ideal Self typically functions as a macrofactor, yet as pointed out by Taguchi et al. (2010: 88), the concept sometimes becomes a replacement for what is usually referred to as Gardnerian integrative orientation. It is believed that the shift of meaning has taken place on the grounds that the concept of integrativeness, useful in research on immigration, is unsuitable for foreign language learning, though Gardner himself never stated that integrative motivation means assimilation into a group (Gardner, 2010: 88). The term *L2 Ideal Self* is also quite often treated as synonymous with a view of oneself as a successful speaker (Mezei, 2014). Empirical research does not offer much help in clarifying the notion because *L2 Ideal Self* is envisaged in different ways: indices of this variable differ and researchers' interpretations make it even more difficult to draw clear boundaries between this and other concepts related to motivation and the Self. In her research on adult distance learners, two thirds of whom were in the 40-60 age range, Linda Murphy considers statements of the type 'I wish to be able to…', 'I am determined to…' or 'I want to achieve…' as demonstrations of the *Ideal Self* related to either proficiency or academic success (Murphy, 2001: 120-121). Martin Lamb in his research on teenagers on the one hand cautiously treats expressions of the type ' My plan is … to take an English course' or 'Maybe… I will keep studying English' as future visions or self-guides, but on the other speaks about strong *Ideal L2 Selves* in the respondents (Lamb, 2001: 188-190). To make the situation even more complex, Taguchi et al. consider statements such as 'I can imagine...' as information revealing the *Ideal Self* (Taguchi et al., 2010: 91-92).

Is this no more than a certain degree of a terminological chaos or do we face a tendency well-known in humanities to find new names for well-known concepts? Whatever the answer to these questions, concepts of L2 Self and L1 or L2 Identity remain "blurred and indeterminate" (White, Ding, 2009:336), which calls for going back to source disciplines, i.e. psychology and sociology, to examine the meaning of basic terms and then look at their reflection in SLA/FLT.

2. The Self, Identity and language

It is easier to answer the question of what we are like than the question of who we are. The former relies on our unity across time, while the latter presupposes a list of personality characteristics. The *Self* is often treated as synonymous to *Identity* (Swann, Bosson, 2010) and is defined as a process entailing introspection and contemplation – "taking the self as an object for thinking" (Oyserman

et al., 2012: 71), together with a reflective aspect which gives coherence to individual life when new events are absorbed and interpreted (Giddens, 1991; Singer, Blagov, 2004). The *Self* also presupposes otherness and exclusion as it "can only be defined by reference to a non-self" (Delanty, 2000:115).

Some researchers, however, make a distinction between the *Self* and *Identity*, pointing out that the *Self* does not need to show continuity on a time scale, as it is related to the sense of *mineness* or *belongingness*, i.e. experience which is pre-reflected and body-oriented, while *Identity*, being related to memory, presupposes both experience and continuity across time (Northoff, 2014).

According to the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins et al., 1987), people display two basic types of self: the *actual self* and the *ideal self* which envisages the kind of person a given individual would like to become. The individual tends to reduce this discrepancy in order to match the two. Reduction is more likely to successfully take place if the outcome is vividly imagined, in line with social norms and far from the *feared self*. In SLA this is often illustrated by a distinction between a learner's present-day linguistic skills and his/her vision of becoming a proficient speaker or a respected polyglot (Dörnyei, 2009).

Apart from *the actual* and *the ideal self,* at least two other types of *Self* are distinguished: *imposed self* which generates actions required by other people and *ought to self,* more or less voluntarily adopted by the individual. Each type of self can be demonstrated in specific types of behaviour: *actual self* in spontaneous ones, *ought to self* in internalized ones and the *ideal self* in those modelled after significant others. In social psychological terms self can also be divided into *private self* and *public self,* the former displayed in intimate and the latter in social contexts. The use of a regional dialect in private and a literary variety in public can serve as a linguistic example here.

Little relationship has been found between an individual's private and public selves, but a significant correlation has been noted between public and imposed ones (Taylor, 2013), most probably because the public self, though shaped by individual goals, is at the same time a result of a struggle between various sources and types of expectations, a phenomenon especially important in adolescence. Individual beliefs about the way one is perceived by others are at play here as first noticed in the seminal work of Erving Goffman (1956) and then frequently investigated by psychologists and sociologists (Schwartz et al., 2011; Tice, Wallace, 2003). Yet self-presentation is shaped not only by interpersonal relations, but also by the vision of the ideal Self; Salvador Dali's provocative autobiography with its title of *La vida secreta de Salvador Dali* is one of the best illustrations of this psychological process (Dali, 1942/2011).

Our public self tends to produce a variety of unexpected decisions. For example, some L2 students have been found to give up efforts to develop language

proficiency feeling that their language level does not permit proper self-presentation (Ringbom, 1987, 2007) and therefore "their cognitive sophistication is unnoticed by others leaving them feeling vulnerable and socially disadvantaged" (Taylor, 2014: 99). On the other hand, high proficiency can expose students to the danger of being considered 'dumb native speakers' rather than educated foreigners who cannot be expected to be familiar with all the cultural aspects of the daily life in a given country, naturally understandable for native-speakers (Ringbom, 2007).

Individuals can envisage a number of *possible selves*, a concept introduced three decades ago (Markus, Nurius, 1987), and often referred to today. *Possible selves* can be lived out mentally as fantasies or may become part of actual performances as in Katarzyna Kozyra's *In Art Dreams Come True* produced at the Barbican Art Centre in London and the Gender Bender Festival in Bologna where after months of strenuous training she presented herself as a cheerleader, a diva, a drag queen and a castrato (Kozyra, 2007). *Possible selves* can also be subjected to conscious decision-making whereby a desired self is selected and strived for. This obviously depends on whether the individual decides to treat the *Self* as solid and stable or as fluid and changeable. On the way to a desired self, several transient selves can appear, yet those momentary ones do not always seem coherent being no more than a try-out of what is useful and/or accepted (Marcus, 2008). In the process of making linguistic choices, try-out assimilation into a new society may lead to the adoption of a new language, although later decisions to return to the homeland and to the native language are not infrequent. Antoni Cierplikowski (1884 - 1976), referred to as 'Antoine - the king of the coiffeurs and coiffeur of the kings', assimilated and integrated into French society at the age of 17 adopting French as his personal language. Yet years later, at the age of 86, he decided to come back to Sieradz, his hometown where he changed his identity as well as his dominant language back to Polish (Orzeszyna, 2015). The crucial concept of the psychological approach to the *desired* or *ideal self* is, therefore, motivation with its varying directions and levels.

The *private self* manages behaviour and ways of self-presentation, i.e. a display of the *public self*, which means that in different contexts different identity images are displayed, sometimes for expressive and sometimes for strategic reasons. An exchange between Churchill and his wife in *Darkest Hour* (urged by Clemmie to 'Just be yourself', he replied, 'But which self shall I be today?') shows interaction between *private, multiple* and *public selves.*

An individual may internalize their *public self* and thus make it part of the private one (Leary, 1995). Taylor adds that "a self - displayed publicly - may be internalized into one's private self if it is accepted or approved privately"

(Taylor 2014: 95). The phenomenon, also referred to as the *carryover effect* (La Guardia, 2009; Tice, Wallace, 2003), is exemplified by the internalized Polish-Italian aristocratic public self of Michał Waszyński known in Poland as Michele Waszynski, born Mosze Waks as a son of a blacksmith from Kovel, Volhynia, later a successful Hollywood producer, a friend of movie stars and a member of Italian and Spanish high society where he was held in highest respect due to his legendary elegance and impeccable manners now immortalized in the documentary *The Prince and the Dybbuk* (Niewiara, Rosołowski, 2017).

Memory related to time and space is considered the core of identity. The process of recalling and reconstructing the past serves the purpose of shaping our current points of view. Heidegger pointed out that our past lives in our present, a forceful statement his own life soon bitterly confirmed (Heidegger, 1927/2008). Positive examples of this principle can also be found and may even be reflected in language skills – Zbigniew Brzeziński's Polish fluent and flawless till the end of his long life spent in the United States shows the impact of the first years in his home country, always vivid in his mind.

Memory is based on images of the past. What we remember is a function of the number and the density of events from which selection is made. The result is mediated by our tendency to organize what is remembered into a coherent whole. Language plays a crucial role here as demonstrated in the research on human cognitive networks; bilinguals presented with isolated words in L1 tend to produce associations based on situations that took place in the context of L1, while L2 words bring L2 memories (Matsumoto, Stanny, 2006).

The *Self* is constructed through both remembering and forgetting. Memory, the heart of identity, is therefore shaped not only by reminding, but also by removing – images of the past are influenced by the filtering of active or passive participation in a given event. Forgetting makes prioritization and selection possible, thus creating space for new information. Forgetting enables us to keep in mind only what is essential and concentrate on it rather than to deal with a chaotic mass of impressions. Inconvenient aspects which might ruin our self-esteem and those which are emotionally difficult tend to be forgotten – or to use Toni Morrison's expression, *disremembered* (Morrison, 1987). Writers like W.G. Sebald, but also historians and therapists, engage in processes of retrieving, sometimes referred to as the process of *rememory* (Sebald, 2003). Forgetting, suppression and recall play an important role in what we are or consider ourselves to be, a feeling reflected in retrieving a childhood language thought to be forgotten, as was the case of the Polish orphans repatriated from the territories of the then Soviet Union after World War II or of the Jewish children evacuated in a huge rescue effort from Nazi Europe to Great Britain (Baumel-Schwartz, 2012).

The concept of *Self* is also formed through the experience of space, a main foundation of our psychological integrity. It shapes our behaviour and ”legitimises some forms of behaviour while disqualifying or constraining other forms” (Blommaert, 2005). It also attaches different values and functions to individuals’ linguistic repertoires, influencing how an individual positions himself or herself, and how he or she is positioned by others, hence for example the choice of French in conversations of aristocratic and intellectual circles of White Russians in exile (Lis, 2015).

For a long time identity was related to roles, tasks and situations, which made it relatively stable. Yet, in the contemporary world where mobility, choice and change undermine stability – identity seems to be much less solid and, what is more, tends to be fragmented into episodes which call for no logical sequence and lead to no obvious consequences, generating ‘alternative costs’ of lost chances or choices once made (Bauman, 2004). This episodic self-experience can, however, and in fact often does, take a shape of a coherent whole (Pepin, 2007), a result possible not only thanks to ‘the interpreter’ in our left hemisphere and the selectivity of our memory, but also thanks to language. Intuitively used narrative forms help us to maintain the sense of ‘oneness’ within a coherent *Story-telling Self,* “the internal ongoing narrative of who we think we have been, who we think we are, who we would like to be and the person (s) we are afraid of becoming” (Irie, Ryan, 2014: 110). Our *narrative self* is therefore born linguistically and – as Barthes maintains – is characterized by past tenses (Barthes, 1953/1972).

Because identities are temporal, ongoing and constructed in social contexts through interaction (Porębski, 2002), they also tend to be reconstructed when individuals move between contexts and languages (Hemmi, 2014) – examples of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov or Eli Ŝafak help us to understand linguistic decisions taken after a change of one’s social and political milieu.

3. Social identity and language

Social identity is defined in a number of ways. Hogg et al. speak about those who “identify themselves in the same way and have the same definition of who they are, what attributes they have, and how they relate to and differ from specific outgroups” (Hogg et al., 2004: 251). Social identities are also defined as “a person's roles, interpersonal relationships and group memberships, and the traits, characteristics, attributes, goals, and values congruent with these roles, relationships, and memberships” (Oyserman et al., 2012: 95) – a connected rather than a separated perspective showing what makes us similar within a group rather than what makes us different from others. The

same authors maintain that social identity entails a prototype based on inter-group comparisons and polarized away from out-group features.

In spite of all the problems, the individual/personal type of identity is considered more stable than the social one because the former is based on the concept of differences between a unique individual and other human beings, while the latter is founded on shared features and situational standards. The individual and the social reveal a common core and are in the process of constant interaction: identity is positioning rather than essence (Hall, du Gay, 1996). For Stuart Hall, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narrative of the past. Cultural identity is a matter of *becoming* as well as of *being*. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall, 1993: 394). Stability of identity is based on culture, especially in the case of *narrative identity*, which explains why unitary assertions of identity are so often used in politics and why it is so easy to merge it with language and/or religion. The sociological framework permits also to explain the phenomenon of both *changing* and *multiple identities* of bilinguals and multilinguals.

History and sociology show how strongly group identity has been based on national as well as ethnic-religious categories and the significant role of the *us/them* distinction in identity formation. An important role in the formation of social identity is played by the *Storied Self,* a group equivalent of the *Story-Telling Self*. Language reflection of the *Storied Self* can be found in the preservation of the local variety of German among the so-called Zipser Deutsch, a group of settlers brought almost 800 years ago by Hungarian kings to areas depopulated during Turco-Mongol invasions.

Factors influencing the strength of identity and its maintenance in contact with other communities differ across ethnic groups and so does the role of language as demonstrated by research initiated in the 1980s. In Australian research on values, Italians were found to consider family, religion and language as their core values, while the Jewish community emphasized religion, cultural patrimony and historicity (Hamers, Blanc, 1989/2000). In both the United States and Australia, Dutch and German immigrants exhibit the largest language shift; Italians, Chinese and Greeks the smallest; and Poles, Serbs and Croatians stay in the middle (Blanc, 1986). Reduced core values lead to superficial folklore manifestations and to a gradual language loss (Smolicz, 1984). A minority becomes no more than an ethnic group and the feeling of inferiority develops which adversely influences L1 skills. Code-switching and code-mixing become more frequent as indices of L1 attrition, although at the beginning immigrants code-switch in order to better express their intentions in L2. Core values, often responsible for language maintenance or language attrition, are not the only factors at play.

Expressing identity through language may also depend on group self-esteem. Early matched-guise research projects showed a negative stereotype of French-Canadian speakers in both English and French groups (Lambert et al., 1960). A similar phenomenon was found more than twenty years later in Welsh speakers of English (Price, Fluke and Giles, 1983), while Mexican-American children in the United States evaluated Mexican-American speakers lower than did American-born evaluators (Ryan, Carranza, Moffie, 1975).

Language and identity can, however, be influenced by nationalistic feelings of both speakers and their interlocutors (Segalovitz, Gadbonton, 1977), which led researchers to the conclusion that "those who had nationalistic feelings preferred marked accent, while those who expressed fewer nationalistic feelings preferred native-like English" (Hamers, Blanc, 2000/1989: 132).

Official policy – if supported by the community – is a strong factor in maintaining or shifting identities, which is why a rapid split of Serbo-Croatian as a common language into two different codes could take place after the Balkan wars of the 1990s (Bugarski, 2001). In certain cases, however, administrative power is helpless: in spite of living in the diaspora Jews have managed to maintain their religion and their holy language for over two millennia despite changing languages of everyday communication, for which reason Israeli language revival undertaken in the 20th century was not only possible, but proved highly successful (Edwards, 2012).

State policy often exerts pressures to trigger or speed up identity changes, though regional policy sometimes takes reverse directions. Quebec's Bill 101 of 1977 making French the only official language in the province in order to safeguard the place of the French minority in Canada elicited a strong antagonistic reaction from the Association for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC). This revealed anxieties of the English majority which in Quebec formed a small minority within a predominantly French population (Romaine, 1995). Yet, to maintain the social and political role of the government, state policy can move to make considerable concessions for the local identity and language as it happened in New Caledonia where initially local languages were suppressed, later merely discouraged, and eventually protected.

Group identity strengthens national feelings leading to protests against administrative changes in the status of languages as reflected in controversies over the role of Russian in the Baltic republics, English and French in Cameroon or Bengali and Nepali in the Gorkha community of Bangladesh. In recent times resistance vis-á-vis the language offered in the school system has also been pointed out (Canagarajah, 2004).

Social identity of adolescents and young adults underlies their sensitivity to disapproval, rejection, scorn and disregard related to their ethnicity

and/or home language. Negative attitudes which they face in the school system elicit rebellious behaviour and absenteeism which result in poor linguistic and academic achievement. Romaine (1995) notes that Finnish learners in Australia, where they are a respected minority, do much better in the school system than their peers in Sweden where their ethnic minority does not enjoy the same level of respect. For the same reason she notices that Mexican children with several years of education in their home country, where they do not feel inferior, do better in the American school system than those who started their education as a minority.

The age factor cannot be overlooked. Social identity in adulthood, characterized by caring functions springing from family life and the responsibility for the children, results in the maintenance of identity through language as its index. This can be seen in middle-class social groups demonstrating budding awareness of their national identity in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. It is also visible in national minority groups of all social levels requesting ethnic language education for their children at the primary stage where it is crucial for identity formation, but showing decreased interest in school teaching through the medium of their language at secondary and tertiary levels as demonstrated by the numbers of Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Slovak schools and students across educational stages in Poland. Unfortunately, middle adulthood is also characterized by a certain degree of conformity considered indispensable to ensure a career and support the family. For that reason, a stigmatised minority can be found to accept the stigma and internalize a negative attitude towards their language (Czykwin, 2000).

Social class and ethnic identity are important mediating factors in linguistic decision-making; middle-class speakers from countries regaining their national independence such as Ireland or Latvia were quicker to revive their language and/or to start using it in public domains. This means that sometimes language develops before ethnicity and sometimes ethnicity precedes the revival of the language. However strong a correlation between ethnic identity and maintaining or reviving a language, caution is always recommended as intense ethnic attitudes tend to develop into nationalism, which breeds intolerance and is itself not always based on solid historical facts. Karl Deutsch (1912-1992) famous for his anti-Nazi stance, and a president of the American Political Science Association, who taught at MIT, Harvard and Yale, pointedly observed that a nation is “a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours” (Deutsch, 1989). Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, is also believed to have warned against nationalism reminding that “if nationalism of the strong is ignoble, nationalism of the weak is imprudent” (Edwards, 2012).

All these issues are especially important in the era of increased educational, professional and economic mobility accompanied by the growing strength of ethnic identification. The role of first, second and foreign languages changes dramatically. Identity under these circumstances depends not only on attitudes and beliefs, but also on technical possibilities to acquire the language which would make it possible to consider advantages and disadvantages of integration and/or assimilation. Access to communication, for example, is difficult for immigrants hired to do jobs such as cleaning or work at automatic conveyor systems, because they have no possibility to enter interaction, which precludes the acquisition of a new language (Norton, 2000, 2013). Lack of opportunities to reach a higher level of proficiency means at the same time lack of possibilities to make informed choices and take conscious decisions related to social identity.

4. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, both careful introspection and large amounts of observational data are needed to construct a complex picture of one's own Self, but do not guarantee its stability. At the same time, dynamic changes of the Self parallel with mobility and cross-cultural contacts reshape interrelations between personality features and social contexts, therefore different aspects of the Self come to the surface under different circumstances, resulting in a wide spectrum of variously motivated linguistic decisions made not only by individuals, but also by whole communities. The picture of L1 Self seems to be far more complex than that of a foreign language learner's Self. The concept of *L2 Self* or *L2 Ideal Self* can be subsumed more easily under the *Motivational Self System* within which learners identify their personal goals and plan their learning paths. Being more general, but at the same time more pragmatic and tangible, MSS proves useful in the field of both second and foreign language learning.

Considering the significance of both L1 Self and group identity decisions for interpersonal contacts and communication effectiveness, learners need not only to be made aware of their own attitudes and behaviours, but also of the value of tolerance and openness to other cultures. Teachers, therefore, should not underestimate the role of the students' home languages in shaping their motivation to learn second and foreign ones.

Teacher educators should not forget that because teachers often teach in the way they themselves have been taught, pre-service teacher training needs to be based on trainees' self-reflection and autonomous decision-making.

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