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Abstract

Languages symbolise identities and are used to signal identities by those who speak them. People are also categorised by other people according to the language they speak.

People belong to many social groups and have many social identities. A person may be 'a teacher', 'a Real Madrid supporter', 'a German', 'a Parisian' etc.

Each group has its own language or variety of a language e.g. a regional group will have a regional dialect (which is a language variety), or a football team supporters club will have its own jargon. Speaking that language/variety/jargon gives a sense of belonging to the group.

There is often a particularly strong link between language and a sense of belonging to a national group, a sense of national identity. In 'simple' cases, there is one 'national language' which is spoken by everyone with the same national identity. Most cases are however complex, and involve more than one language (e.g. Switzerland), and some languages are linked to more than one national identity (e.g. German).

'National' language(s) are taught in schools as subjects and are also used in schools to teach other subjects. For some children this means learning to read and write, and then speak, a different language from the language of the home (or a new variety of their home language), and in doing so there may be implicit or explicit encouragement to forget the language of the home. Such children are not learning their 'mother tongue', and because of the link between language and identity, this can mean weakening or even forgetting the social identity created in the home, a regional identity or an identity brought from another country.

The use of the 'national' language for teaching/learning other subjects can be a barrier to learning those subjects for children for whom it is not the first language, 'mother

tongue'. This may be caused by terminology and ways of speaking/writing in those subjects.

It can also be understood as a link between language and 'subject identity'. Learning the subject is like joining the social group who identify with that subject (e.g. historians, physicists) and it is necessary to learn their language.

The link between learning foreign languages and the emergence of new identities is not clear but is potentially important. Learning foreign languages in certain circumstances may be an experience of acquiring a new identity, although the methods of teaching may also actually prevent this. The implications for the emergence of a European identity in addition to national identities can be speculated on in the light of policies to encourage this.

Introduction

Languages and varieties of language (subtle variations or major differences of pronunciation and grammar) are ways of expressing and recognising the many social identities people have.

Social identities are expressions of identification with a social group (and are different from personal identity). For example, a person may be 'a teacher', 'a golfer', 'a Newcastle football supporter', 'a Berliner', 'a German', 'a European' etc, depending on how many groups they identify with, and they will tend to speak in different ways according to which identity is dominant in a certain situation, at school, in the family, in a conference, when travelling in Asia, etc.

Languages are both acquired naturally and taught formally and both natural acquisition and formal teaching create, strengthen or weaken the links between languages and identities.

An important language/ identity link is the one between 'national language' and 'national identity'. This link may be created, strengthened or weakened by formal teaching in schools, especially in 'Language as Subject' and a 'Framework/ Handbook for Language(s) of Education' would need to address this issue. The purpose of this paper is to present (some of) the aspects which are important.

1. Definitions and explanations

First of all, here are some definitions and explanations which describe the key concepts and ideas. There is inevitable simplification and anyone can think of many exceptions, but the purpose is to establish the main trends in the relationships among languages and identities.

a) Languages and language varieties:

People communicate with each other using the shared language of their group. The group might be as small as a couple (married or unmarried partners, twins, mother and daughter etc. who share a 'private' language where only they know the meaning of some words) or as large as a nation, where everyone understands the allusions in their shared language (often allusions to shared history, to contemporary events, to media people of fact or fiction etc). The 'secret' language of the smallest group and the 'public' language of the national group are two 'varieties' of the same language.

Every social group, large or small, has its own language variety, (regional groups have varieties of the national language (as opposed to regional or minority languages) which are usually called 'dialects') and there is overlap among all the varieties.

b) (Social) Identities:

People belong to groups (a family, a sports club, a company, a school, a minority, a nation, Europe etc.)

1. They identify with groups and say 'I am an X';
2. They are identified and accepted by others in the group: 'You are one of us; we are X' (but sometimes they are rejected by people in a group to which they would like to belong);
3. People from other groups identify them as belonging to a group: 'You are an X and we are a Y', where X and Y are the same *kind* of group (e.g. two families, two sports clubs two nations).

c) Individuals have many social identities and language identities:

Individuals belong to many groups and speak the language varieties of each group. An individual can be a member of a family, a sports club a nation, and (unconsciously) speak in each group a variety of 'the same' language.

They become conscious of this only if someone uses the 'wrong' words for the group or does not recognise the allusions being made in a group conversation.

Speaking the 'correct' variety makes the individual an 'insider', a member of the in-group; not doing so identifies the individual as an outsider or a member of an 'out-group': 'S/he is not one of us, an X, because s/he does not speak our language'.

d) Individuals acquire the (spoken) language variety of a group naturally:

Children are (usually) born into a family and acquire the language variety of the family; they go through the same process with their group of friends and acquire a different language variety of 'the same' language, one which may be partly incomprehensible to their parents and is meant to create a sense of inclusion in an in-group (simultaneously creating a means of excluding unwanted people).

When the group of friends speaks a completely different language (not just a new variety of the same language) to that of the family, the difference is noticeable and people say that the child is 'bilingual'.

This process of acquiring either new language varieties or completely new languages can continue throughout life as people become members of different groups within the same society, or move to a different society. Sometimes they do not notice they are acquiring a new variety of 'the same' language, and sometimes they do – especially if they have to acquire a completely different language.

e) Schools teach (written) language formally:

Children acquire spoken language naturally and inevitably; written language has to be formally taught and learnt (and this is not always inevitable and successful).

Because schools are (usually) institutions created by states and owing allegiance to states, the variety of written language taught is the 'official' language and children

learn to read and write the language of the state, i.e. one of the varieties present in the society.

They are also often encouraged to speak the language they write, to make their spoken language more like the language of the state.

The name of this language is often related to the name of the state (French/ France etc.) but not always (French/ Belgium for example). The process of learning the state language (or languages) is part of the process of learning/ acquiring one's state/ national identity, a process in which the whole school curriculum plays an important role.

2. Language, national identity and teaching Language as Subject (LS)

In the 'simple' case, the name of the lessons of LS is the name of the language of the state and of the (dominant) group of people in the state i.e. 'the nation'. This is not only the simple case but also the one which was the desired ideal case when nation-states were first founded (and in some countries, still is). There are a number of consequences:

1. This means that when children learn Language as Subject they learn the language which they and others will use to identify themselves with the social group called 'the nation'¹.

Examples of this simple case exist in Europe: Poland, Portugal ... Other examples are being (re)developed: Slovakia, Lithuania ... In such cases, the language of LS is, for most children, the 'same' language as that of the family and the differences of variety are not noticed. It is therefore possible to say that (most) children are taught their 'mother tongue' in LS classes.

However even in these examples but especially among all the exceptions to this simple, 'ideal' case, the language of LS may not be the same variety as the language of the family. In these cases – in fact they are the majority of cases – the language of LS is not the 'mother tongue' of the children. When we then take into consideration the many children who speak a completely different language at home – and this is the case for families of immigrant origin or for children of historic/indigenous minorities – it is not possible to say that the language of LS is their 'mother tongue'.

Therefore a neutral term 'Language as Subject' has to be invented but even this is a simplification because in some cases in lessons of LS, children learn more than one language (variety) e.g. in Norway where Nynorsk and Bokmål are learnt, both being the means of identification with Norway and being Norwegian.

2. In LS classes, children learn not only to read and write the (national) language(s) but are also encouraged or perhaps obliged to speak this variety, to speak as they write. In some cases, too, children are encouraged/ obliged to forget the variety they speak at home and/ or among other social groups – for example the 'dialect' they speak – and, by implication, to forget their other identities in favour of the national identity. On the other hand, they may be encouraged to become 'bilingual', writing and speaking both school/ national and other varieties. This means they are encouraged to keep both identities, their regional identity and their national identity (Breton and Français, for example).

¹ See the quotation in the section on foreign languages for an example of identification through the 'national' language, which is disturbed by an experience of another language and country.

Where children's home language is a completely different language, these same processes are even more difficult for them to handle and if they are encouraged to 'forget' the language of the home, the effects are likely to be worse because this means 'forgetting' the language by which they identify with the home. In some education systems such children are taught the written language of the nation/state and of their home and encouraged to keep both identities, (e.g. Italian and Belgian for immigrants to Belgium) but this is much more contentious as the two parts (Italian and Belgian) are perceived as being mutually exclusive. (Success is more common in other continents where hyphenated identities are more acceptable, such as 'French-Canadian' or 'Italian-Australian'.)

For the children of historic/indigenous minorities the situation may be even more complex. In some situations, where the minority has its own schools, there may be two Languages as Subject, and the relationship between these and the 'mother tongue' or dominant language of pupils is complicated. In the same classroom there may be pupils who think of LS1 as their mother tongue whilst others do not, and similarly in LS 2 classes; and there may be pupils who think of both as mother tongues.

3. In LS classes learners encounter texts, most of which are written in the 'national' language. Reading these texts and writing about them in the same language strengthens their competence. The stronger their competence the more easily they identify with the national identity, and the more readily they are identified by others as being members of the national group and the nation state.

Furthermore, some of the texts are chosen because they are icons of national identity. These are the texts of the national canon, usually but not necessarily literary texts. The shared national language and shared allusions to texts which all school pupils have been exposed to, are the factors by which members of the in-group identify each other and differentiate themselves from 'outsiders'. In this way a collective memory is created in LS.

The collective memory is also created in other subjects of the curriculum, e.g. history, geography, and reinforced there by the use of the national language. This is one reason why we also need to consider the identity question in Language across the Curriculum.

3. Language across the Curriculum and Identity

The language of LS, in which children are taught reading and writing processes, is usually the one in which they also learn other subjects. This is a constant reinforcement of the link of national language and national identity.

There are also situations, particularly in the schools of historic/indigenous minorities, where two languages are used for teaching other subjects, and this a reinforcement of the roles of both languages in the identity formation of young people.

Problems often arise for learners in using language for learning other subjects. Such problems can be analysed in terms of how the specialised terminology of, for example, history or physics can be a barrier to understanding the subject. In this perspective, history or physics teachers are encouraged to explain, simplify, translate into familiar language.

Another way of seeing the problem is in terms of social identities. People learn to be historians or physicists and become identified with the social group 'historians' or 'physicists'. Teachers of subjects identify strongly with these professional group identities and, like all social groups, they have a shared language/ language variety.

When they speak or write to each other within their group, they use the language they acquired by sheer exposure to other historians/ physicists or were formally taught when they first began to study history/physics.

Children who learn the language of history or physics thus begin the process of identification through the specialised language of these subjects. They may identify strongly, weakly or not at all with these subjects and learn the language accordingly. The problem is that, as with other language varieties of 'the same' language, people only notice the special variety when someone deviates from it. Physicists do not notice they speak and write as physicists until they hear and read 'incorrect' language in physics. They may assume learners are using the language incorrectly because they do not understand the concepts and ways of thinking shared by physicists, but the reason may also be that learners are using another variety – their 'ordinary' language.

4. Foreign language learning and identity

Although fears are voiced in some countries about the loss of national identity caused by learning foreign languages, especially English, there is little, if any, research evidence to justify this fear or dismiss it. It would in any case be difficult to generalise as the specific contextual societal and psychological factors would need to be considered. Nonetheless, when fears are voiced in countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands or in East Asian countries such as Taiwan – where there is said to be 'English fever' – or Korea or China, the lack of scientific evidence does not mean that policy-makers should ignore them.

Given the lack of generalisable evidence, case studies are illuminating, such as this account by a primary school teacher from France who had lived and worked in Portugal for a year, learning Portuguese as a beginner. Her account of her return to France and how she realised that she had become a different person in Portuguese, contrasts with what she had experienced in the traditional language classroom:

I came home by train and when I arrived at the station in Bordeaux, I needed some change to leave my case at the left luggage office. I went to get some change at a newspaper kiosk and 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 (lit. inscribed in) 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.

I think you have to live through that experience to understand it. There really is no transfer possible from one language to another. In fact I had thought,.. the courses I had done at school had given me the impression there is, that it's a code which you decode. But it doesn't work like that at all².

The experience had taught her several things about language and identity:

² Original text in Appendix

- That her French identity is closely related to the French language she had acquired as her first language;
- That her French identity was no longer exactly the same after her Portuguese experience and 're-teaching' herself the French language;
- That another identity had formed through her use of Portuguese; this is not a 'Portuguese' identity in the sense of being a native-speaker identity but an 'interlanguage' identity dependent on her level of competence in Portuguese;
- That classroom language learning had been quite different, giving her the false impression that a foreign language is just a simple encoding of the learners' first language.

We can draw from this example the conclusion that there is no likelihood of classroom-based foreign language learning affecting identity, when the teaching method gives the impression that a foreign language is just an encoding of the first language. A language is experienced as a code when learners get the impression that every word in their own language can be translated by one and only one word in the foreign language, and that the structure of a sentence exactly follows the structure of the sentence a learner wishes to translate from their own language.

Until there is more evidence about different methods – for example about Content and Language Integrated Instruction where a foreign language is used as the medium of instruction in other subjects across the curriculum – no general conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between foreign language learning/teaching and the effect on social identities.

5. Language learning and European identity

We await research evidence, but it is important to consider the relationship of foreign language teaching/learning and identities even while we await evidence, for it is related to the concept of 'European identity'.

The strongest policy statement on the relationship between language learning and European identity is to be found in the EU White Paper of 1995. The economic advantages not only of linguistic ability but also of a capacity for cultural flexibility are stated in the following paragraph:

Proficiency in several Community (i.e. EU) languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the border-free single market. This language proficiency must be backed up by the ability to adapt to working and living environments characterised by different cultures.

This is followed directly by a second statement on the direct relationship between language learning and identity, a relationship which is presented as causal:

Languages are also the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages helps to *build up the feeling of being European* with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe.
(European Commission, 1995: 67 - emphasis added)

The consequence of this analysis was to suggest that all citizens of the European Union should learn their own and two other languages of the Union. Even though this document has been displaced by later policies which do not repeat this analysis, it is an important statement about the political significance of language teaching..

While the Council of Europe has not made a similarly strong statement about the effect of language learning on identity, the importance of language learning has been clear from the beginning. The European Cultural Convention, which is the foundation for cooperation among member states, declares the aims as:

to develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of their cultural diversity, to safeguard European culture, to promote national contributions to Europe's common cultural heritage respecting the same fundamental values and to encourage in particular the study of the languages, history and civilisation of the Parties to the Convention.

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/cadreprincipal.htm>

In contemporary documents, the Council of Europe statement of purposes is presented as a question of identity:

The Council was set up to (...) promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures'
(www.coe.int/T/EN/Com/About_COE/)

The importance of language was evident from the beginning and the link with identity is implicit in the ways in which language, culture, heritage and history are presented as related concepts.

There is no research which examines the relationship between language learning and the acquisition of a new, additional identity, a European identity. It would be very difficult to isolate the effect of language learning from other factors, but this is an important issue in the discussion of the Languages of Education.

6. Conclusion - opportunities

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. Young people have been shown to be adept at this as they move from one social situation to another. Becoming consciously plurilingual³, with the help of teachers of the Languages of Education, is an enrichment.

³ (Plurilingualism is) the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw. (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Council of Europe, 2001: 168).

Appendix

« J'ai pris le train pour rentrer et en arrivant à la gare de Bordeaux, j'avais besoin de monnaie pour laisser ma valise à la consigne. Je suis allée faire cet échange dans un débit de journaux, de tabac, et je me suis entendue parler comme j'aurais parlé avant, à savoir 'Bonjour Madame, voudriez-vous m'échanger cette monnaie?'. Donc m'entendre parler sous une forme que je ne pratiquais pas au Portugal, parce que je n'avais pas atteint ce niveau de langue, et en m'entendant parler, disons, avec cette forme, ce niveau de langue française, je n'étais plus la même, et j'ai vraiment ressenti à ce moment-là que pratiquer une langue, les enjeux étaient importants quant à la personnalité. En m'entendant parler français, ce n'était plus moi, celle qui avait vécu onze mois au Portugal, ce n'était plus moi qui parlais. Et pourtant j'avais cette langue française qui est inscrite en moi, mais ce n'était plus moi qui parlais. Alors j'ai vécu une quinzaine de jours me réenseignant cette langue française qui m'avait quittée, mais la forme n'était plus la même. Pendant quinze jours j'étais vraiment mal à l'aise, simplement par la pratique de la langue et les valeurs qu'il fallait en dégager. (....) Je crois qu'il faut vivre cette expérience pour la réaliser. Jamais je n'ai... Il n'y a pas de transfert possible, en fait, d'une langue à une autre. Je pensais... en fait, les études que j'avais faites au lycée me laissaient croire que si. C'était un code qu'on décode. Mais ce n'est pas du tout comme ça que ça fonctionne. »

Byram, M. 1996, "Framing the experience of residence abroad: the pedagogical function of the informal interview." *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. 9, 1, 84-98.