

**MULTILINGUAL IDENTITIES:**

**"Non, je ne regrette rien".**

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Résumé

Pour comprendre l'interaction sociale, il est fondamental de s'intéresser aux relations entre le langage et l'identité. Cet article présente une approche de la structure de l'identité, à savoir une personne disant JE, lieu diachronique de la mémoire et de l'intention individuelle, et une Personne Sociale, à qui les autres disent TU/VOUS, et qui occupe synchroniquement des positions et des rôles successifs. Les stratégies nécessaires à l'interaction exigent à la fois des façons de formuler sa propre identité et d'attribuer à autrui des catégories d'identités. Ces stratégies sont ici discutées et illustrées, en insistant sur la négociation des identités dans des situations bilingues et plurilingues.

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### Introduction

Let me start with a very benign example of a tussle over linguistic identities. I recently had the immense good fortune to spend a term working in New Zealand and at Easter I went touring with my wife and younger daughter. One of our excursions was to a Maori village just outside Rotorua, where we went for a concert and for a delicious *hangi*, a traditional meal cooked on hot stones in a hale in the ground.

We travelled to the village by coach. There were about thirty passengers: half were New Zealanders, who all sat together in the back of the coach, and the rest consisted of a mixed bunch of foreigners, who sat together in the front, including a Swiss, a Frenchman, a Briton (me), a Canadian, and so on.

After the concert and the meal – and, it has to be admitted, generous amounts of New Zealand wine – we all piled back into the coach in cheerful mood.

I have to confess that my cheerfulness evaporated suddenly when the driver announced over the microphone that foreign visitors were "now expected to sing a national song." This was greeted with enormous enthusiasm by the New Zealanders in the back, but the whole idea just made me cringe and I went into a state of something like panic. What on earth could I sing? An *a capella* version of 'Land of Hope and Glory'? Or 'On Ilkley Moor Baht 'At' with a phoney Yorkshire accent?

It was little consolation to find that the other foreigners were in similar dismay and disarray. The Swiss seemed completely unable to think of a 'Swiss national song' – and anyway, what language would it be in?". The Frenchman said in a resigned tone "I suppose it will have to be 'Frère Jacques'". The Canadian stared gloomily out of the window.

But, to cut a long story short, all our anxiety turned out to be quite unnecessary. Because when the driver called out the name of a country it was the New Zealanders who, to a man, burst into spontaneous song.

"Switzerland", calls out the driver. The Swiss doesn't even have time to get to his feet.

"Edelweiss, EEE-del-weiss ..." sings the crowd in the back of the bus.

"Canada", says the driver".

"I'm a lumberjack and that's O.K." is performed with accompanying virile gestures.

"France next." The Frenchman just has time to start. "Frère ..." but he is hit by a wall of sound:

"Non, rien de rien, NON, je ne regrette RIEN!"

The moment I've been dreading, "The U.K." says the driver.

The massed choir doesn't hesitate for a second. "I've got a luvverly bunch of coconuts!"

Even such a trivial event as this can tell us a lot about the ways in which multilingual identities are constructed. Indeed, it is precisely because the incident was trivial that it reveals aspects of a process that are largely out-of-consciousness yet everyday, an essential part of social reality.

The first thing to note is, of course, that the New Zealanders were on home ground, as well as being in the majority. Whether you explain their behaviour in terms of passports or power, they clearly felt that they could decide on the nature of others' (non-New Zealand) identities in terms of their own knowledge about Switzerland, France, and so on. In other words, all other identities were to be constructed with reference and in opposition to their own, ethnocentrically. Clearly, some of the 'foreign identities' the New Zealanders expressed were quite unrecognisable to the individuals concerned. I myself was quite perplexed as to why 'I've got a luvverly bunch of coconuts' should be considered as some kind of archetypical British anthem, and the Canadian was very uneasy with "I'm a lumberjack and that's OK". But this is entirely the point: identities are largely constructed by others in their own image and likeness.

A second point concerns the role of language in this process. Discourse backed by power (as good a definition of 'ideology' as any) can be used to impose identities. This is exactly what the New Zealanders did: they monopolised the discourse – they quite literally 'called the tune' – putting their words in our mouths. Like ventriloquists, they expressed our selves and our own voices were stilled or unheard.

Their discourse provided the coordinates for our identities, fixing their subjects in positions in social space- *their* social space.

It is this area – the relationship between language(s), knowledge and identity that I would like to examine with you today. As my story shows, these matters can have an immediate impact on the processes and quality of interpersonal communication, and given that the majority of the world's population is at least bilingual, such incidents are far from rare. So I believe that these issues are important and that today's event is a timely one.

Mind you – and I do hope I will be forgiven for painting this out – the University of Cambridge has not always displayed the positive interest in and open attitude towards bilingualism which it is so clearly doing today. In particular, in the late nineteenth century, it provided a pulpit to a certain Professor Laurie to preach against what he saw as the evils of bilingualism (and, indeed, almost any kind of contact with foreign languages.) Moreover, Laurie was regarded as a great authority in other European countries. For example, his work was quoted frequently by his equally virulent French counterpart, Dr. Pichon and they corresponded regularly- although one wonders in what language.

Amongst the more temperate of Laurie's remarks was that even if a child had the opportunity to grow up speaking two languages well, "so much the worse for him", partly because the second language would take up the room in the child's brain necessary for other subjects, so that he would learn only half of what his fellows knew, but mainly- and here we come to today's topic – because it would be prejudicial to his moral life, his character and his identity.

There is nothing the slightest bit surprising or unusual in what Laurie had to say. He was expressing, albeit in a more systematic and privileged way, ideas about language that were part and parcel of nineteenth century nationalism and the ideology of the nation state. The whole thrust of European sociological thought on this issue (names which come to mind are Durkheim, Weber and Tawney, of course, but also and more recently Gellner and Giddens) has been to show that standardised national languages are necessary conditions for highly centralised societies developing

specialised division of labour, as was increasingly the case in the nineteenth century (although these socioeconomic contingencies were largely justified in terms of romantic representations concerning the emergence of the nation).

To put this in the simplest possible way, if the King's writ is to run throughout the nation, all subjects must at least understand the King's English. And just as it is impossible to be loyal to two Kings and two nations, so it is impossible and undesirable to speak two national languages 'like a native'. Once languages have become symbolic of nationhood, someone who speaks two languages is immediately suspect, since they must obviously have divided loyalties. They are perceived as unpatriotic, as a potential spy, someone whose morality and character is dubious, whose real identity cannot be relied on.

Unfortunately, Laurie's ideas are still very widespread. Indeed, they form part of the bedrock of everyday, commonsense reality for many Europeans. However, as the result of vast political and social changes over the past half-century- all with implications for the nation-states – as the result, I would say, of a reconfiguration of identities, these ideas are being forced into consciousness and challenged. And how do people react when their commonsense world is challenged? Well, let me illustrate that by quoting a very informal piece of research I carried out when I was preparing this talk.

I thought it might be interesting to look through a selection of the British press and study the occurrences of the word 'identity'. My results were predictable but still, I believe, instructive. I found first that I had two main contexts of usage:

identity 1 - as used in discussions of crime and criminals.

identity 2 – as used in discussions of politics and politicians<sup>1</sup>.

I then took the second group and made a list of the topics involved. Again, there were no surprises:

Europe; the EU; European unity, army, taxes

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<sup>1</sup> I appreciate that some people may find that this distinction reveals a certain naïvety on my part.

Brussels  
The pound and the Euro  
National sovereignty  
Immigration

Finally, I looked at collocations: in these contexts, what were the other words which tended to crop up most frequently? There were three main candidates:

- 1/ 'national', as in 'national identity'.
- 2/ 'culture', as in 'national identity and culture'.
- 3/ 'threat', as in 'a threat to our national identity and culture'.

This, I suggest, is the answer to my question about how people react when their world of commonsense reality is challenged: they perceive it as a threat.

One further point: whereas certain terms- 'federalism', for example – were subjected to intense semantic scrutiny by journalists and politicians alike, at no time (literally, not once) was there any attempt to define or even examine the meaning of 'identity'. It is a given, taken for granted, so much so that it is little more than a sort of battle-cry or vocal regimental colours. And, of course, it is also salutary to remind ourselves that this problem concerns many other people and not just the British, and that, for many Europeans, one of the main 'threats to identity' is not Brussels or the Euro, but the English language and the related fact that a new MacDonaldis restaurant opens somewhere every five hours.

#### ***LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY***

What I would like to do now, then, is to look briefly at the concept of 'identity' and some of the ways in which it is related to language and languages.

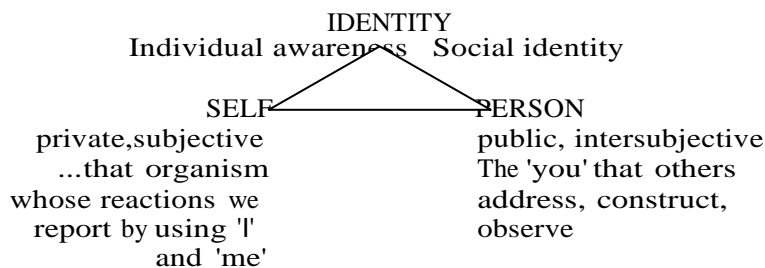
For over two thousand years, 'identity' has been regarded as a philosophical aporia, a problem so deep that we can hardly formulate the questions, let alone the answers. So obviously I do not imagine for a moment that I am going to provide solutions to the mind/body problem, the monadic as against the multiple self, or the relationship of the individual to society – all those dualisms, Cartesian or

otherwise, along with solipsism, relativism, determinism and all the other -isms that want to get in on the act. However, I would like to suggest that, to some extent at least, in the social sciences – precisely because they are social- these problems can be side-stepped or, as the philosophers say, 'bracketed'.

Philosophers are interested in 'conditions of sameness', criteria for saying that an entity, a human being, say, or a stone, continues through time. They can therefore discuss 'identity' as a quality which entities 'have' without reference to other entities, since it is intrinsic. To put it simplistically, a stone does not need another stone to tell it what it is.

Socially speaking, though, 'identity' is a quality which is ascribed or attributed to an individual human being by other human beings. We do need other people to tell us who we are, and, as we shall shortly see, they do so all the time: waiters and doctors, siblings and bus conductors, colleagues and friends all constantly bombard us with instructions concerning the positions and roles we occupy, what groups we are and are not members of. And, as we shall also see, we ourselves jockey for position, sending out a stream of identity claims.

Again, one of the few things people working on 'identity' agree about is that a principal source of difficulty lies in the fact that the term is used in two very different ways:



On the one hand, we use 'identity' to talk about what makes individuals just that, individual. What makes 'me' me, as opposed to all other individuals, the agent of my actions, the continuing locus of my thoughts and memories,

separately embodied in a numerically and physically distinct organism, which self-reports using the pronoun 'I', which is subjective and private.

On the other hand, we use 'identity' to talk about what makes this individual like other individuals in terms of shared characteristics, memberships, the 'you' that others address and construct, report on and to. For instance, when we say

"Mary Smith is a thirty-six year-old mother of two who works as a cashier for Lloyds, votes Labour and sings in East Chester choir."

we have categorised Mary in terms of her

- age cohort
- gender and family
- occupation
- political filiation
- residence
- leisure activity.

Here, then, we are talking about social identity, the sum of all the sub-groups of which the person is a member. All these categories are related to language in at least three different ways:

i) They are encoded in language: expressions such as 'occupation' and 'cashier', 'mother', 'Labour' are selected from the repertoire from which identities can be constructed, different languages and societies having in varying degrees different repertoires.

ii) These different aspects of Mary's identity are likely to influence indexically the ways she talks and the ways people talk to her- as mother, cashier, chorister, and so on.

iii) Mary might be a member of more than one speech community. In other words, she might enact different memberships in different languages. For example, let me add the information that Mary Smith is also Mrs. Benali. She met Rachid, a Frenchman of Algerian origins whilst on holiday in Paris. They use both French and Arabic at home and because of her language skills, Mary is regularly called on to help in the Foreign Exchange department. Like all bilinguals, she code-switches between her languages according to



the specific roles she is called upon to play, according, that is, to the situationally salient aspect of her identity.

We can generalise schematically, though by no means exhaustively, from Mary's example as in the table below:

PARAMETERS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY	
Figuration	Aspect
Male, female	Gender
Teenager, pensioner, middle-aged	Age
Deaf, hearing	Audition
Londoner, Liverpudlian,	Residence
Lawyer, welder, cashier,	Occupation
Bus conductor, bookseller	
Plymouth Brethren, Muslim,	Religion
Atheist, R.C. C. of E.	
Green, socialist, conservative	Politics
Chess player, swimmer	pastime, sport
Married, single, divorced	marital status
Jamaican, Irish, Pakistani	Ethnicity
Speaker of Urdu, French,	language(s)
Arabic, English	

As I mentioned earlier, any of these categories of identity can correlate with language, though not necessarily in the same ways, of course. One of the most strikingly familiar examples is the close relationship between 'occupation' and vocabulary. Individuals demonstrate their membership and knowledge of trades, professions, gangs, political movements, and the like by their use of technical terms and jargon. In a general way, that is, you are much more likely to know and use domain-specific terms if you are a practitioner in the domain in question.

Ekphrasis  
Phoneme  
Quinto acuto arch  
Chromatic scale  
Mandamus  
A double top

You know *ekphrasis* if you are an art historian or critic, phoneme if you are a linguist, a *double top* if you are a darts player. You are what you know: 'identity' is made of know-

ledge and, to paraphrase M.A.K. Halliday, language is both what we know and how we know it. But these are oversimplified, one-to-one examples. After all, our knowledge of a term and a domain can be a matter of degree: a *quinto acuto arch* and a *chromatic scale* are just 'some kind of' arch or scale to most people, but to architects and musicians they are far more specific terms. The closer we are to the centre of the group the 'community of practice', as Etienne Wenger puts it (1998), the more meaningful the term, because it is more richly grounded in personal knowledge and experience, in identity and life. The more peripheral our participation in the group's activities, the vaguer the meaning.

So, social identity is made up of a configuration of memberships and each membership is knowledge-and-language based. It is social, constructed in our communicative dealings with others. Each individual's identity is made from what some philosophers have called 'a moral narrative' or 'career', a communicative and epistemic autobiography consisting of the experiences and knowledge acquired as a member of that configuration of groups. As I have just said, we are what we know- and who we know, because they keep on telling us. Let us now look briefly at some of these membership strategies.

There's a good girl.

Big boys don't cry.

Business class passengers (EU nationals, members, staff, etc.) only.

Compare and contrast ...

Why do you French (women, men, Catholics, Northerners, etc.) always ...

"Corporal!"

Pregnant women should consult their doctor before using this medicine.

To illustrate the ways in which speakers select situationally salient aspects of their addressee's identity, the philosopher Louis Althusser cites the case of a gendarme being called to the scene of a crime. His uniform and his revolver confer on him both symbolic and real power, so that when he shouts at a person running away "Hey, you, stop!" that person becomes a criminal because the gendar-

me says so. The runaway, that is, is both the subject of and subject to the gendarme's discourse: "Ideologies interpellate individuals."

If that were all, as the postmodernists claim, it would be a very deterministic, very pessimistic account of personal identity. However, if you look at discourse, at actual examples of situated communicative interaction, what you find is that the individual is consciously and constantly trying to affirm his or her sense of identity. Our attempts are not always successful of course, and this can give rise to conflict, but the very existence of conflict disproves the thesis of absolute social determinism:

Who do you think you are?

Who do you think you're talking to?

Here are some further examples of what I call identity affirmation strategies or claims:

***1/ Prototypical forms:***

• I'm an

X

I'm a teacher, a Rotarian

I'm one of those people who ...

• (Speaking) as an X

Speaking as an anthropologist, a lifelong Arsenal supporter

As a single mother, a taxpayer, a beer drinker ...

• *We/us* Xs

We are playing Chelsea this afternoon.

Us Londoners ...

***2/ The use of domain-specific discourse (technical terms, slang, passwords, etc., see above)***

***3/ Other strategies:***

Well, wearing my hat as Treasurer of the Sports Committee...

Are you asking me for advice as a lawyer or as your friend?

You're telling me!

Is the Pope a Catholic!

I'll have you know you are talking to someone who spent thirty years in India!

A subset of identity claims consists of multilingual identity claims, claims which are related to the negotiation of language choice and / or social identity as a bilingual. I

will illustrate claims of this kind with reference to Finland, since I am familiar with the sociolinguistic situation of that officially bilingual country. For example, if you go to Stockmann's, the main department store in Helsinki, you will find that most members of staff wear two or more little flags in their lapels – Finnish, Swedish, German and Russian, say. This is in fact a very direct form of self-identification as a multilingual – "These are the languages I speak and in which I am prepared to provide service." Other strategies of this kind include:

- Keeping your options open:

Although Finnish and Swedish (Finland's two official languages) are very different, there is a form of greeting which they have in common:

"Hei hei!" / "Hej hej!"

Use of this form is therefore 'unmarked', leaving interlocutors free to use either language or to continue to negotiate for a preferred choice.

- Verification: A speaker who has a preference checks with his or her interlocutor to see whether it is acceptable:

"Får jag talar svenska?" (Can I speak Swedish?)

Given that Swedish speakers are very much in the minority except in a very limited number of coastal areas, it is usually a Swedish speaker who makes such a request – and who has to change languages when the reply is negative.

- Multiple choice: A speaker who is unsure of an addressee's linguistic identity may use both languages, leaving the choice to the addressee, at the same time declaring their own identity as a bilingual:

"Goddag. Päivää."

"Talar du svenska tai puhun suomea?" ("Do you speak Swedish", said in Swedish "or shall I speak Finnish?", said in Finnish ")

Interestingly, civil servants in contact with members of the public are being encouraged to adopt this strategy and to state the name of their department or service in both languages, in conscious imitation of Canadian practice.

Finland has possibly the best record in the world as regards the protection and respect of its native minority's linguistic rights, but even so a speaker who initiates an exchange in Swedish will often receive a flat reply in Finnish, as Finnish speakers assume that Swedish spea-

kers are bilinguals. Since this is almost invariably the case nowadays, cases of conflict are extremely rare (cf. Ringbom, 2001). Nonetheless, this kind of code-switching unmistakably reflects the relative power of the two speech communities, and it is a world-wide phenomenon.

However, there is one form of identity claim which outstrips all the others in terms of frequency, functions, power and complexity. It is code-switching. Bilinguals are people who use two languages, switching from one to another according to a vast array of social and situational factors. The analysis of code-switching patterns can, therefore, help us identify those factors, laying bare the interior workings of society by revealing just where the boundaries are between its constituent parts. It shows us where topics and domains begin and end, it delineates groups, it traces the contours of identities. Here are two examples:

i) The first is something my younger daughter said during a parent-teacher meeting at her French secondary school. The poor child has inherited her father's gift for mathematics, with the result that she had an overall mark of 4/20, well below *la moyenne*, the statistical average expected of all French pupils, but often obtained by only a few (don't try to understand).

Katja was being roundly condemned by her maths teacher. She tried to defend herself, but to no avail. Her teacher's verdict, the institution's verdict, was implacable: "Pas d'excuses, t'es nulle."

Despairing of softening her teacher's hard heart, she switched from French to English:

"C'est vrai que j'ai pas la moyenne, but my marks are going up and I'm doing my best."

By switching in this way, Katja changed the whole situation, including her identity, and mine. She was no longer the school pupil whose behaviour is subject to the institution's objective evaluation, against which there is no appeal. She was now my daughter, daddy's girl, and as such able to appeal to quite different subjective and affective criteria, 'doing one's best'.

ii) I recently moved house for the first time in over twenty years. Amongst the treasures I found in the attic was a recording of a spoof interview I made with Katja when she

was twelve years old. To understand it, you need to know that Katja is a serious musician and was studying harp at the Conservatoire: all her musical knowledge and experience have been lived and acquired in French. You also need to know that her father is as bad at music as he is at maths.

F: In the last lesson you had, what was it?

K: I learnt about the *temps binaire* and the *temps ternaire*.

F: Oh, what's that? What's the *temps binaire*?

K: Well, it's a *temps* with *two temps*.

F: Uh huh. And the other one, what's that?

K: The *temps ternaire* is a *temps* with *three temps*.

F: Hmm. Suppose so. Good. What else have you done? K:

Lots of things.

F: Tell me about them.

K: The *gamme chromatique* and the *gamme mineure* and the *gamme majeure*.

F: Oh, what are they?

K: Well, the *gamme chromatique* is a ... a normal *gamme* with a *ton* in between each note, a *demi-ton chromatique*.

F: Uh huh. And what's the other one?

K: A *gamme majeure* is a *gamme* with two *demi-tons diatoniques* and a *gamme mineure* is a *gamme* with three *demi-tons diatoniques*.

F: Uh huh.

K: And the *demi-ton chromatique* is when it's for example *do-do dièze*. And the *demi-ton diatonique* is *do – ré bémol*.

F: Oh, yeah.

For some people, this kind of switching is clear evidence of incompetence and split identity and Katja's bilingualism should be banned or prevented. What such people fail to realise is that this impression of linguistic incompetence is the direct result of her musical competence. If she did not know about music (like her father, say) this gap in her English vocabulary would never come to light. Indeed, one could argue that the surest way to prevent this kind of behaviour would not be to do away with her bilingualism, but to do away with her music.

Nor is her identity split. She just happens to be a musician in French and, so far at least, has never needed to express herself in English on that subject. Her identity is a bilingual identity, one which she can use as a resource when

speaking to another person who knows both languages.

Again, think back to the list of 'technical terms' we looked at a minute ago: for people who do not work in or have knowledge of the relevant domains, such words are 'foreign'. "Ekphrasis?" we say, "It's all Greek to me." Yet we would never dream of accusing an acquaintance who uses the term of having a split personality, largely because these words are "English really" and "in the dictionary." We simply accept that the speaker has specialist knowledge and a corresponding aspect of social identity that we do not share. In linguistic and communicative terms, qualitatively, there is in this respect very little difference between code switching and style or register shifting and the approach to identity adopted here accounts for both in similar ways.

(For further discussion of the relationship between code-switching and identity, see Gumperz 1982; Romaine 1995)

## **SELF AND PERSON**

Earlier, we saw that one of the main sources of difficulty in discussing 'identity' is the fact that this term is used to refer to both individual and social aspects of human nature, two uses so different that for many observers they preclude all possibility of ever providing a coherent account of the concept, since they seem to lead inexorably to various forms of dualism.

One possible solution - one which is already included in the diagram on page 181 - is to see these two meanings not as rivals vying for the crown, an exclusive choice, but as complementary, as the constitutive elements of a superordinate concept, two different facets of identity which we might call 'Self and 'Person'.

However, if this suggestion is to be anything more than simply playing with words and diagrams, we have to be able to say something about the relationship between 'Self and 'Person' which is more than a simple affirmation that they exist, that this distinction reflects our nature, that each of us has a kind of dual nationality, that as socio-political animals, we are both members of society, and embodied individuals. If, that is, our theory of 'identity' is to have any

kind of explanatory or even descriptive power, we have to be able to say something about the sources of selfhood and personhood and the relationship between them.

I would like to suggest that as the result of work, much of it empirical, carried out in a wide range of the social sciences, we are now in a position to do just that, to make principled and cogent claims about the sources of identity, its architecture and the processes through which it is constructed. As it would be quite impossible to give any kind of overview or summary of all this work in the time available, I will just give a very limited sample from three of the major disciplines concerned, anthropology, social psychology and linguistics<sup>2</sup>:

### *Anthropology*

In a sense, the whole aim of anthropology is to ask 'What does it mean to be a human being?' What, that is, are the parameters and limits, the degrees of variability, of human nature? So it is not surprising to find the self, personhood and identity at the very centre of anthropological inquiry, with its sister discipline, ethnography adding the question '– and what does it mean to be French, English or Cantonese?'

Important progress has been made towards answering these questions by researchers in the field of 'Innate Intersubjectivity Theory', in particular by Colin Trevarthen and a group of Scandinavian colleagues (Trevarthen, in Jahoda and Lewis, 1988). They argue that the only way to account for a wide range of behaviours and capacities observed universally in children learning to communicate is to postulate the existence of a 'virtual Other', a sociolinguistic acquisition device which is an innate function of the mind allowing the newborn to recognise others as potential communicative partners. I cannot do justice to the richness of their argument (or their data), but it is important to note here that the term 'communicative' is being used in its full, social sense of 'making common' or 'sharing', and that what is shared is meaning. Both Self and Person are constructed

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<sup>2</sup> Fuller details can be found in the 'Bibliography on Identity' at the end of this article.



through successive intersubjective coupling with others, that is, meaningful exchanges or conversations. But the forms of interaction – the communicative and rearing practices, the specific language involved can vary and so, therefore, can the types of identity constructed.

### ***Social Psychology***

A number of social psychologists have arrived at very similar conclusions, but by a very different route. They take as their starting point the theory of the sociologist George Herbert Mead on the social origin of selves. Mead (1934 et passim) argued that minds and selves can only emerge as a result of communicative interaction, language, and that what is called 'the mind' is in fact an internal conversation based entirely on language and social meanings. We can see this in terms of an 'I' and a 'Me', where both are part of the 'self, but where the 'I' is the individual as having consciousness, the 'Me' is the individual as an object of that consciousness, including the internal, subjective representation of the Person.

Over the last decade or so, this theory has been resurrected in various forms and combined with ideas borrowed from a very diverse group of thinkers, but who share this vision of discourse as the primary mechanism of socialisation and the construction of selves. They include Vygotsky and Bakhtin; Foucault and Althusser; Elias, Mannheim and Schütz ; Lévi-Strauss; Fairclough, Billig, Potter and Wetherell. However, the person mainly responsible for this synthesis is the neo-Marxist Ian Burkitt who, in his masterly study *Social Selves: Theories of the Social Formation of Personality* argues that

*The self is social in its entirety. Only if we begin from the study of social relations can we truly understand how individuals are social selves ... social life is the source of individuality and human beings only develop as truly human within a social context (Burkitt 1991: 215)*

### ***Linguistics***

Both of the above approaches insist on the importance

of language and discourse as the primary mechanism for the construction of identities, so it is not surprising that linguists should have been keen to examine in real detail just how that mechanism functions. At least three major lines of investigation have been opened up. The first concerns the role of language as a component of ethnic identity and there is already a copious literature on this topic, much of it related to multilingual communities (Fishman 1977, 1999 ; Haarman, 1986). The second, an offshoot of anthropological studies of rearing practices (Jahoda and Lewis 1988), deals with the ways adults speak to children in different cultures according to social expectancies of competent adult persons (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984).

The third, relatively recent and relatively neglected line concentrates on deictics and address systems in general and pronouns in particular. An especially interesting and detailed study is Mühlhäusler and Harré's *Pronouns and People* (1990). They examine the pronominal systems of dozens of languages from all round the world and present convincing evidence that they vary in the social space, positions and functions allocated to the 'I' and that these correlate with variations in the ways in which identities are conceived and configured, represented and enacted. 'Identities' are constructed appropriately through the acquisition of certain practices, particularly those involved in taking and assigning responsibility: individuals have to learn a local theory of personhood which is to a large extent both summarised and instantiated in the pronoun system and other communicative practices.

For example, they demonstrate clearly that the Western notion of 'Self as the embodied self, the self-within-the-skin, where the physical and the psycho-social are co-terminous, is by no means universal. Despite wide-spread belief to the contrary, not all languages have pronominal systems with three 'persons' (!) and two numbers. There are languages where 'self may include close members of one's family, and there are languages, such as Iaca (New Caledonia) for example, which have sets of pronouns marked for different tenses, which contradicts Western notions of physical continuity. There are languages such as Inuit and Japanese which are group-, rather than speaker-oriented, so that individuals speak first and fore-

most as representatives of their collectivity. This seems to explain partly at least the Inuits' well-documented collective behaviour: when one laughs, all laugh, when one cries, all cry.

My own attention was drawn to this issue by a Burmese student of mine as early as 1985. Although he was a specialist in French, he confessed to me that he was having problems because he found French "such an impolite language". Somewhat surprised, I pressed him for details, examples.

"The word 'je'," he replied. "In my language, I have an 'I' for when I am superior or inferior to you, for when I am pleased with you or angry with you, so that when I speak French, I always feel like a bull in a china shop, never respectful, never expressing my attitudes appropriately."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I understand that 'Burmese' does not in fact have any pronouns strictly speaking, using conventional nominalised expressions as terms of address, etc.

## Conclusion

There is, then, an increasing weight of evidence drawn from disciplines across the board that identity is socially constructed, that our sense of self can only emerge as the result of communicative interaction with others. Children raised outside society do not acquire language, though they have the capacity to do so, and for that very reason, they fail to form selves. Bi- and multilinguals, on the other hand, may form more complex selves, but given that these correspond to their more complex social and linguistic realities, this is a necessary resource, an expansion of identity and a potential source of expressive, cultural and instrumental richness rather than being intrinsically damaging

Whether that potential is realised, and whether the individual's bilingualism is experienced in a positive way, will depend almost entirely on extrinsic, social factors. Children who grow up speaking two language varieties which are recognised as such – two national languages like English and French, say, which are taught at school and widely appreciated, will usually develop a very positive self-image in this respect because other people tell them their bilingual identity is a good thing. Children who find that one of their language varieties is not recognised as a 'real language', or is despised or seen as a vehicle of unacceptable beliefs and values may well find themselves the targets of negative comments and come to develop negative self-images. The solution, though, is not to do away with their bilingualism (which would probably be a disaster in practical terms and only serve to exacerbate social tensions) but to try to improve linguistic attitudes and relationships between the two speech communities. It is no good blaming bilingualism for social (political, religious) problems which are largely independent of language, as can be seen, tragically in monolingual Northern Ireland.

Finally, a brief word about pedagogical implications. If there is any truth at all in the ideas about identity discussed here, then we need a radical change in our language teaching objectives. At present, almost all language teaching takes the 'native speaker' as the model to be imitated. But trying to clone natives speakers – to erase the learner's identity and replace it with another – is not only highly

unrealistic, it is also unnecessary (only spies really need to hide their background identities) and probably unethical: what gives us the right to try to supplant a learner's identity in this way?

In our classrooms, we are preparing our learners for the one kind of social interaction in which they will never, ever participate, a conversation between two monolingual native speakers. Instead, what we should aim at is to enable them to express themselves, their selves, in another language as an extension of their own identities, to be French in English, German in French, Russian in Catalan, to be, that is, competent foreigners without any sacrifice of their own culture and identity.

**LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY:  
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