

Language and Individual Identities

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Abstract

This article attempts to clarify the link between language and individual identity. An individual plays different roles in society. His or her identity keeps changing according to context in time and space. This identity shift is mainly managed by language. In this article the language has been shown in action by citing different examples and cases from history and day to day happenings to show how language plays its role in defining our identity. In this regard theories about language and identity have been discussed. It is also brought into broad focus how dialect and accent can be the marker of a particular identity.

Key words: Language, identity, dialect, accent.

Introduction

Identity has become a major theme in the field of linguistics now. And when it comes to language it is sense of our own identity and others' sense of identity about ourselves that we choose our expressions and words. It is the identity that gives us choice of language. Our language expresses our ethnic, religious, regional, educational, psychological, relational and many other identities. It is because we keep changing our identity according to the context, except for our certain rigid and stable identities that of gender, ethnicity and *et cetera*. According to Edwards (2013), "language and identity are ultimately inseparable" (p. 20). The direct connection between the two has been acknowledged in the diverse fields such as anthropology, education, applied linguistics, sociology and psychology. The question who we are leads to the consciousness about our identity. But the question who we are depends upon the answer to the question how others look at us. In this way the identity of an individual is a relational matter. It depends upon the view of our role and position in the eyes of other members of the group. We act and speak according to the understanding of the interlocutors about ourselves. And when we

are engaged with a different interlocutor our identity, too, would shift automatically. Therefore identity is thought to be dynamic and fluid, always shaping and reshaping according to the context in time and space. So when we speak we constantly construct the meaning keeping our ongoing identity with every passing moment. Our language use is constantly in contact with the mind to alert us about the suitability of our language choice negotiating the needs of our social identity at that time. In this way language and identity have direct influence over each other and are constantly engaged in a process of producing and shaping each other.

According to Bauman (as cited in Hall, 2013), “Individual identity is the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others” (p.34).

From a view of applied linguisticscall identity “a set of essential characteristics unique to individuals, independent of language and unchanging across contexts”. Therefore, use of language doesn’t affect the identity of an individual, though one can display it or hide it.

On socio-cultural level, the language use and individual identity is seen to be the product of lived experiences. It is the outcome of interaction with the social, political, cultural influences. Therefore, the individual identity is explained to be of fluid, dynamic and changing nature. This view has given new directions to the research being done in applied linguistics field.

Our actions and language are bound by the peripheries of gender, race, religion and the various family and social roles. These constraints require us to act and use the language accordingly. However, this is important to note that what we do to keep up our assigned identity is in line with the historical backgrounds of such identities. A female in our society knows what particular actions have been historically passed down to her. This knowledge and enactment by the same group gives her the particular set of actions and language use. (Pierce Bourdieu, 1977) popularized the term *Habitus* for this phenomenon.

We can say that our social interactions in action and in language are the engagement of various identities. Philipsen as cited by Kelly (2002) conducted a study in Teamsterville including men only to see how men enacted their identity. He found identity enactments contextual. He found when there was symmetry in age, occupational status and ethnicity there followed a good deal of talk among men. If the context was contrary the talk was limited for it was considered a matter of appropriateness.

Language and Individual Identity

Language marks the identity of an individual. Language of a person accompanies the accent, the rise and fall of pitch and a particular register to make and mark his or her identity. The language of any individual will include particular register according to his or her gender, kinship, class, region, religion, profession and, *et cetera*. So we can recognize a soldier, advocate, mechanic, teacher, child, gender, or any other identity through their language or idiolect. In the context of identity it is important to note that it is sense of self that gives us sense of existing. As a matter of fact we are *selves* instead of just *self*. And in the modern complex era we have more layers of complex selves than the past. We can identify mothers from their affectionate manner and register of speech shown to their children. We can identify a soldier from their rough manner of speech and use of battle words. We can identify advocates from their language of law. The same is true for every member of society. Language is a marker and identifier. We are so accustomed to such linguistic behavior from the particular individuals that we find it out of normality when we see a digression in the language behavior of such interlocutors. The resulting effects can be humorous.

A doctor who looked over her glasses and said “Well, it is the high jump for you, squire” would seem frivolous and unfeeling; and a mechanic who reported that “Your conveyance is, I regret to inform you, in a most sadly dilapidated state” would invite both wonder and laughter. More importantly, each would appear to have stepped out of character, violating our expectations.

(Edwards, 2013)

Personal Identity and the Role of Language as Identity Marker

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The notion of “sameness” is at the heart of idea of identity. It raises important questions of how one being is same at one given time and at another. Or how a physical being is different from mental being: the mind and body relationship.

We as human beings, normally, have physical and personal identities. Not only what we are when one looks at us but also: we are what we know. And what we know is expressed through language. And there is great role of memory of facts and memory of experience in our personal identities. Our personal identity includes our all repertoire, our traits, and characteristics, mental and physical abilities and our relations.

As an acquaintance of mine remarked, “I lost my mother three years before she died. Once she had lost her memory, we didn’t share anything anymore. She just wasn’t Mum any more, not the same person. Because she had no past, no shared memories. (Riley, 2007)

The mother in the above example loses her memory and loses the cognizance of her identity and others related to her. Therefore her language turns back into carrying less meaning for her son or daughter. Her language fits less into the common definition of language when we call it a “semiotic activity”. So, it is consciousness about each other’s relation which comes out with intelligent sounds that we recognize each other and act accordingly. This gives birth to our sense about personal identity.

The use of cricket slang by Imran Khan signifies the cricket career of this cricketer turned politician. In the same way we find people from diverse backgrounds using language and style of speaking in a peculiar manner.

Dialect, Accent and Individual Identity

There is much debate available on scholarly level regarding the definition what dialect is. And there are definitions which include the most agreed upon features of the term dialect. One such definition is “dialects are varieties of a language used by groups smaller than the total community of speakers of the language (Montgomery, 1998). Keeping in view this concept we could make out that dialect shall have its own grammar, vocabulary, and semantics. The dialectical identity could be a geographical identity too. It is because of certain geographical

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constraints that distances might give birth to different variety of language which would still keep the large foundations of the parent language. This dialectical feature too makes people look and feel a different identity.

Accent too give a different identity to a speaker. According to Laver (1994), “The technical meaning of the term accent is simply manner of pronunciation (p.55). Therefore, the manner of pronouncing the words is different from person to person and from area to area.

Sindhi Dialects and Individual Identities

I would like to mention identity build up on geographical level, taking up the context of my own province, Sindh, Pakistan. Sindhi language is divided into various dialects. It comprises of *Siro* (Northern) dialect, *Wicholo* (Central) dialect, *Lari* (Lower) dialect, *Lasi* (From Las Bela area of Balochistan) dialect, *Thari* (from Thar area), *Kuchi* (from Kuch region). People speaking these dialects have their own distinct identity.

The central dialect of Sindh is the one which is the dialect of all education and literature. Therefore it is the standard dialect of Sindhi language. Each dialect attaches different identities to the section of Sindhi people speaking it. Northern Sindhis, known as *Utraadis*, are thought to be aggressive in nature by the Sindhis speaking *Laari* dialect.

Accent is also one of the identity markers. It determines the locality of the speaker. We know the transporters, and traffic sergeants by their rough and high pitched voices. We know the people from Forces having robust and commanding voice. We can know an academician from his or her educated pronunciation and soft accent. Even if one has conversational command with reference to correct sentences and vocabulary one would be still struggling to resist hard with his original identity if his or her native accent is ceaselessly intruding.

In this way we can recognize Sindhis on the basis of their accent and dialect as well. Because each one of the dialects has its own particular idioms, vocabulary, grammar and accent.

An American’s Identity Dilemma

My visit to England was disturbing in the sense that I suddenly found myself lost in many respects. The first factor that directly resulted in my lost sense of self was the realization that I could not speak English very well. That is to say, that I didn't have the "right" accent and I also had difficulty understanding people because of their regional accents. People often had questions about my accent, which sounded American to them. I felt embarrassed...(Mantero, 2007)

Shaw's *Pygmalion* and the Case of Liza's Individual Identity

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is another befitting example to establish connection between accent and identity. Society is divided into various classes. Each class has its own distinct identity. These different classes are portrayed in the world famous play of Shaw. In his play Shaw presents lower and working class through the characters of Liza and Mrs. Pearce. He presents middle class through the character of Doolittle. Whereas he represents upper class through the characters of Pickering and the Higgins.

His whole work is about accent, dialect, language and identity and social mobility. He proposes the possibility that through learning the manners and accent of high born one can have class mobility. He shows the concepts of people who are shut in their identity. And their identity is enclosed in an acquired mode of language, accents and manners. He showcases how poor Liza speaks with her rough cockney accent. His protagonist, Prof. Henry, undertakes the challenge to bring upward social mobility in the life of Liza by teaching her accents and manners of the high born. At first Liza's accent and language is reminder of her poor and wretched background:

The Mother: How do you know that my son's name is Freddy, pray?

The Flower Girl: Ow. Eez ye-ooa san is e? Wal, fewd dan y' de- ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy atbaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them?

[Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London]

Shaw (2014) (ACT-I)

But, the following excerpt represents the post trained life of Liza, the time when she has completed her training in language, accent, dialect and manners become complete under the tutelage of Professor of Linguistics and his upper class family. The difference of identity is quite clear as the poor flower girl adopts an educated and standard English dialect and accent. Her choice of words and modes of expression becomes her new born identity which is superior to her earlier low born identity.

LIZA [desperate] Oh, you are a cruel tyrant. I can't talk to you: you turn everything against me: I'm always in the wrong. But you know very well all the time that you're nothing but a bully. You know I can't go back to the gutter, as you call it, and that I have no real friends in the world but you and the Colonel. You know well I couldn't bear to live with a low common man after you two; and it's wicked and cruel of you to insult me by pretending I could. You think I must go back to Wimpole Street because I have nowhere else to go but father's. But don't you be too sure that you have me under your feet to be trampled on and talked down. I'll marry Freddy, I will, as soon as he's able to support me.

Shaw (2014) (Act-V)

With the help of Henry Higgins, professor of linguistics, the poor girl learns the manners, accent and language of high born. In this way her mobility of identity becomes possible. But with the rejection of idea of marriage from Professor Higgins she is caught in great identity crises. She now is unfit to live with her original class because she had changed her identity through learnt language and accent variations. It had given her new awareness about her original class and the hatred attached to it. But Henry's rejection had closed doors to enter the society she had become socially, mentally and linguistically accustomed to.

An instance of “Individual Identity” from plane hijacking incident of PIA Pakistan.

On May 25, 1988 Hyderabad, Sindh bound PIA plane (PK-554) was hijacked as it left the grounds of Gawadar Airport at 5:35 pm. The hijackers wanted to land the plane in India. The Pilot kept his senses intact and informed the hijackers that the plane was short of fuel and food so they needed to land in Bhoj airport India for refueling. Pilot contacted the Hyderabad, Sindh Airport authorities, addressing them as if they were Indians. The authorities on the other side,

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who had known about the hijacking, too adopted Indian identities and used the parole like: *Namaste* (Hi), *Bhagwan* (God), *Ap ka swagat he* (you are welcome). Hijackers were happy about the success of their mission. Two police officers went to meet hijackers adopting Indian names Ashok and Ram and communicated with them in Hindi and pretending Indian identities. Through maintaining this identity police officers got released women and children and then paved the way for full-fledged commando action. Hijacking failed and the perpetrators were later sentenced for capital punishment.

no_handle_ (18 March, 2014)

There are multiple layers of identity society appropriates to us. The human beings are recognized on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, region, religion, gender, age group, family role, workplace role, *et cetera*. It is largely our social identity that makes us behave accordingly.

Candidates Identity in the Job Interview

On an ideal scale, interview requires the identity which must fit into job description. We can observe a candidate wearing formal dress and composed features wait outside the interview rooms. The discourse of the candidate during interview adopts a refined accent, formal language and the jargon of the field he aims to join. On the other hand, the dissimilarity of the interviewers lies in their piercing eyes and the kind of accent and language which comes from someone who counts oneself superior from others in certain situations. The way the candidates speak is in sharp contrast to the way they speak out of the interview room.

If You can Speak You can be Caught

In Forensic science voice identification is one of the major signs to trace a criminal. The recorded conversation are acceptable for helping courts to give judgments. The sound patterns are represented through visual patterns. Through the invention of spectrograph the persons can easily be recognized through their voice. The spectrographs were mainly used in World War-II

Voice Identification Theory

This theory maintains that every person has a voice quality that is easily discernable from others. The uniqueness of the vice lies in the fact that everyone has different vocal cavities, i.e.,

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throat, nasal and oral cavities. It also depends upon the shape, tension and size of the vocal chords found in the larynx.

In this regard the Howard Hughes Hoax is very interesting. Howard Hughes was a very famous American tycoon of the 20th century. He was known for his immense wealth and eccentric nature. He gained prominence by producing controversial mega budgeted movies. He was also an awful aviator of his time. He established his reputation in aviation field by breaking the world air-speed records. But in his latter life, he went into hiding and started living a life of a recluse.

Thinking that Hughes would never come out of his hiding, the author Clifford Irving planned to make millions by writing an autobiography of Hughes pretending that he was authorized by him. Irving earned the contract at 765000 dollars from the famous publishing house Mc-Graw Hill after producing false written evidences of such authority from Hughes. Further, he told the company that Hughes would only contact him and that only on phone because he never wanted to come into public. However, after long time Hughes did appear before public to denounce such fraud. But he appeared through his voice. He only spoke on telephone to the reporters. Now, the issue was whether a real Hughes was talking to the reporters or a fraudulent one. To solve the issue spectrographic ‘voice print analysis’ was used. This machine measured tone, pitch and volume to establish the identity of the speaker. Later, the machine proved the person speaking on phone to the reporters as real Hughes. In this way, Irving had to go into prison for 17 months. The hoax is well documented in the book *“Howard Hughes: The Autobiography: the Most Famous Unpublished Book of the 20th Century-- Until Now”*.

Conclusion

We can conclude that Language is an essential marker of the identity. No one can escape it. We are bound by the words we speak and choose. We can never run away from linguistic identity that is so deeply entrenched in our mind. Language constructs individual identity and that identity is in accordance with class, regional, national and many other identity. So identity is not merely how one looks but it is matter of what body of words one carry and use. On pragmatic

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levels understanding identity helps us understanding and solving many identity related issues in Language and society.

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