

“I am Armenian and a little bit English” – Psycholinguistic View of the Socio-Political Problem of Identity

M. Sokolova, D. Korshunov, A. Sahakian

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Annotation: The article draws scholarly attention to the problem of ‘identity’ and highlights the absence of a straightforward definition of this phenomenon. We claim that ‘identity’, can be efficiently studied as a collaborative effort of the scholars in social and political studies, as well as in psycholinguistics. This joined effort is aimed at bridging the gap between the research focusing on the internal capabilities of the human mind to accommodate several languages and the approaches where language is viewed in a broader perspective, i.e. as a reflection of culture. The article overviews the main factors forming ‘identity’ and concludes that knowledge of one or more languages influences one’s identity and self-identity. Moreover, knowledge of several languages and multilingualism is an identity-forming factor from either the point of view of social and political studies or psycholinguistics.

Key words: identity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, international communication.

The concept of identity or self-identity is one of the corner-stone questions when one comes to dealing with multilingual populations. The utterance cited in the title of this paper belonged to a 7-year-old boy, who spoke Armenian and had started learning English at home with his mum. At first glance, the situation is transparent. The child implicitly puts language and culture together and views his progress in English as a little step towards belonging to the culture of those who speak it natively. However, there are more variables in this story.

This boy – Armenian and a little bit English – lives in Russia and speaks Russian from birth. For him, Russian is the language that dominates his life and social interaction: it is the language of society, the language of communication and instruction at school, the language he hears from TV, the language he reads and writes in. There is another language in his life – Armenian – the family language. It is used with his grandparents, sometimes with his mum, and very seldom with his cousins. So, why did the boy, a heritage speaker of Armenian, not include Russian, his dominant language, in the description of his identity?

Hypothetically, it is a question of same and different. Russian is a default language that unifies everybody in the little boy's world, whereas, Armenian is a feature of a certain social group. The child highlights what is distinctive and leaves behind what is common. Therefore, Russian does not work as a marker of identity because it is not distinctive. If this is the case, what makes English, the language commonly learnt in Russia, so salient for the child? Is it just novelty? Another question, will the principle of same-different underlie self-identity of an adult heritage speaker of Armenian who lives in Russia? Does this principle mean that language and culture always go hand in hand in the human mind?

The answer to the former question is *yes* and *no*. The answer *no* – language and culture do not always go hand in hand – may seem counter-intuitive. Meanwhile, when a linguist studies structural properties of human languages, she finds that whatever principles regulate them cannot be of cultural origin. For example, one's knowledge of American legislation does not help this person find the subject-verb-object in a sentence. The learner's physical capability to pronounce sound [th] does not depend on her knowledge of British or American history and culture either. This impression is reinforced by the data of linguistic experiments investigating mental representations which enable the use of human language. As an illustration, consider example (1).

(1)

a. Kharevanukhin tecel e bakum pisei het hahacoh knodz tornikin
 Neighbor-NOM see-Past aux yard-PREP kitten-DAT prep play-PART woman-GEN
 granddaughter-ACC

‘The neighbor saw the woman's granddaughter playing with a kitten in the yard’

b. Sosedka videla vnuteku zeneciny kotoraya igrala s kotenkom vo dvore
 Neighbor-NOM see-Past granddaughter-ACC woman-GEN that-COMP play-PART prep
 kitten-INS prep yard-PREP

‘The neighbor saw the granddaughter of the woman who was playing with a kitten in the yard’

c. The neighbor saw the granddaughter of the woman who was playing with a kitten in the yard

The sentences in (1) are three versions of what is essentially the same sentence in three different languages, Armenian (1a), Russian (1b) and English (1c): ‘*The neighbor saw the granddaughter of the woman who was playing with a kitten in the yard*’. In each of these languages, there are two possible ways to understand the target sentence: (i) ‘*the granddaughter was playing with a kitten*’; (ii) ‘*the woman was playing with a kitten*’. However, native speakers of Armenian, Russian and English demonstrate consistent preference towards only one option.

The speakers of Armenian and Russian interpret the target sentence as ‘*the granddaughter was playing*’, i.e. they select the same antecedent for the subordinate clause ‘*the granddaughter*’. Native speakers of English understand the sentence in (1) as ‘*the woman was playing with a kitten*’. Examples in (2) demonstrate the structural analysis which underlies each of the interpretations, (2a) for Armenian, (2b) for Russian and (2c) for English.¹ Numbers to the right of the bracket denote the sequences of constituents which return the relevant interpretation, not the exact order of syntactic operations.

(2)

a. [3 kitten with playing [2[1woman’s] granddaughter]]

b. [3[2the granddaughter [1of the woman]] that was playing with a kitten]

c. [1the granddaughter [3[2of the woman] that was playing with a kitten]]

Example (2a) should be understood as [1 woman’s] is part of [2 woman’s granddaughter] and both [1] and [2] are part of [3 kitten with playing woman’s granddaughter]. Examples in (2b) and (2c) follow the same principle.

Please, notice that Armenian (1a) and Russian (1b) demonstrate the reversed order of constituents when the target sentence is read by a participant. The structure of the head noun phrase in Armenian and Russian is different. Armenian has an equivalent of the ‘s-genitive ‘*woman’s granddaughter*’ and Russian the equivalent of the of-genitive ‘*the granddaughter of the woman*’. Therefore, the same interpretation of the sentence in (1) – *the granddaughter was playing* – results from two different structural analyses. (2a) is a structural analysis explaining

¹ To simplify the material, the examples in (2) are given in English only.

the choice for ‘*the granddaughter playing*’ in Armenian, (2b) in Russian. The interpretation – *the woman was playing* – is a result of structural analysis illustrated in (2c). It is most commonly preferred in English.

To disentangle cultural awareness from deep linguistic knowledge, one can check how the sentences in (1) would be interpreted when a person speaks all three languages, Armenian, Russian and English? Will there be one preferred interpretation for all three languages? If yes, which one: ‘*the granddaughter was playing*’ (Armenian / Russian-like) or the ‘*the woman was playing*’ (English-like)?

A psycholinguistic experiment demonstrates that trilingual Armenian-Russian-English speakers are capable of implementing all structural analyses exemplified in (2). They interpret the target sentence Armenian-like when they are tested in Armenian, Russian-like when they are tested in Russian, and English-like when the experiment is held in English.² The results demonstrate that (a) there is an innate sense that linguistic constituents in the human language have a hierarchal structure, thanks to which, the human brain can tune to the structure typical for a given language,³ and (b) this capability of the human brain does not depend on whether the participants identify with Armenians, or Russians or Americans. Their linguistic competence is not related to the participants’ identity, social status, faith or political beliefs. The experiment described here supports the assumption that language and culture do not always go hand in hand. However, even the experiments with a very specific linguistic focus report influence of extra-linguistic factors.

E. Sapir once stated that «languages, like cultures, are rarely sufficient into themselves. The necessities of intercourse bring the speakers of one language into direct or indirect contact with those of neighboring or culturally dominant languages. The intercourse may be friendly or hostile. It may move on the humdrum plane of business and trade relations or it may consist of a borrowing or interchange of spiritual goods—art, science, religion»⁴

² Sokolova, M (2021). Oral presentation at VX International Symposium of Psycholinguistics. Madrid, Spain.

³ For relevant discussion see: Sokolova, M. and R. Slabakova (2021). Processing similarities between native speakers and non-balanced bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069211033647>; Sokolova, M. and R. Slabakova (2019). L3 Sentence Processing: language-specific or phenomenon-sensitive? *Languages* 4 (3) 1-17.

⁴ Sapir, E (1921). *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, pp. 1-4, 11.

The components of the socio-communicative system serving this or that linguistic community are in certain relations with each other. At every stage of the existence of a linguistic community, these relations are more or less stable. A change in the political situation in the country, a change in the state system, economic transformations, new guidelines in social and national policy, etc. - all this can somehow affect the state of the socio-communicative system, its composition and the functions of its components - codes and subcodes.

Switching codes, or code-switching, is the transition of the speaker in the process of speech communication from one language (dialect, style) to another, depending on the conditions of communication. Code switching can be caused, for example, by a change of destination, i.e. the one to whom the speaker is speaking.

The theorization of code-switching has been importantly reliant on the theorization of identity, with both transformed through escalating contact set into motion by globalization. Knowledge of cultural values and social factors affecting language use are a necessary starting point for any study of code-switching.

In many multilingual communities, minority languages are often set-off against the dominant language of the society and some typical instances of bilingual behavior get stigmatized.⁵ For example, to switch from one language to another within the span of one sentence can be viewed as inappropriate. In this case, a study where people read a set of sentences and decide whether the sentences are grammatical or not, may return messy results. When reading sentences with code-switching, the participants may mark them as bad or wrong simply because code-switching is viewed as an instance of socially inappropriate behavior. So far, a linguist-researcher will never know whether code-switching itself makes the target sentence ungrammatical for a bilingual speaker or whether the participants unintentionally implement their social judgement instead of the grammatical one.

Another aspect of linguistic analysis, which can be influenced by extra-linguistic factors is phonology. The studies which focus on acquisition of non-native phonetics often report native language accents in the participants' second language.⁶ Having an accent cannot always be

⁵ Gardner-Chloros, P. (2009). Code-Switching. Cambridge University Press.

⁶ For different approaches to the problem see: Best, C. T. (1995). "A direct realist view of cross-language speech perception", In W. Strange (Ed.), *Speech Perception and Linguistic Experience: Issues in Cross-Language Research* (pp.171-204). York Press: Baltimore; Flege, J. E. (1995). "Second language speech learning: Theory, findings, and problems", In W. Strange (Ed.), *Speech Perception and Linguistic Experience: Issues in Cross-Language Research* (pp.233-277). York Press: Baltimore.

explained by the age of acquisition or the level of proficiency in a new language. It is also unclear to what extent intensive training can modify accent.⁷ There is an opinion that people subconsciously maintain their accent in a new language because they perceive it as part of their identity.⁸

From the field of psychology and psycholinguistics, research on identity spread across humanities joining such fields as social science, political science, sociolinguistics and language pedagogy. These disciplines stick to the *yes-answer* when it comes to the question of whether language and culture go hand in hand. Most often, learning a foreign language and acquisition of a new culture are viewed as parallel processes, which influence the learner's identity.

Language pedagogy puts a special emphasis on the development of 'the secondary linguistic identity' of a learner, i.e. on the learner's capability to understand the new language together with the new culture. Successful language-and-culture acquisition is expected to result in a quality intercultural communication.

Despite the general agreement that an additional language is an important factor in the formation of one's identity, it is difficult to decide to what extent learning a new language influences identity. A lot depends on the social factors. For example, bilinguals and multilinguals who live outside the country of their origin, may still identify as representatives of their native culture. The same is true for their children, who would already be born in the country of current residence. Second and third generation immigrants identify with the culture of the origin of their family, even if they don't speak their heritage language. Here, the defining factors are appearance and the traditions observed in the family⁹.

The most controversial definition of identity comes from political science. Unlike language pedagogy, political science, zooms into the question of national identity and gets focused on the fluency in the native language, above all. However, political science does not reject the concept of co-influence between language and identity. In this respect, the co-called cross-identity should be mentioned. It is a situation in which one's identity gets politicized for geopolitical reasons –

⁷ Ahn, S., Chang, C. B., DeKeyser R., and Lee-Ellis, S. (2017). Age effects in first language attrition: Speech perception by Korean-English bilinguals. *Language Learning*, 67(3), 694-733.

⁸ For discussion see: Cheung, Ch, and M. Sung (2016). Does accent matter? Investigating the relationship between accent and identity in English as a lingua franca communication. *System*, 60 (pp. 55-65); McCrocklin, Sh. and S. Link (2016). Accent, Identity, and a Fear of Loss? ESL Students' Perspectives. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 71(1) (pp. 128-142).

⁹ Popova M.V. Psychological features of a bilingual: a Russian-speaking European // *Russian Language Abroad*. № 6. 2014. C. 67-72. C. 69

an American in Russia or a Russian in America. However, even in the context of geopolitical contradiction, the question of language and identity is not always straight-forward.

Multilingual speakers have a good chance to distance themselves from geopolitical questions. For example, a Chinese-born English teacher in America commented on an Apple-Huawei conflict over the 5G technology in the following way «scholars and intellectuals should not be affected by contextual or political factors»¹⁰. The complexity of the role of language in one's identity is reinforced by the example of the co-called global Russians. These people normally live abroad and speak several languages. However, their political beliefs within this group range from cosmopolitanism to ultra-patriotism¹¹.

The approaches reviewed in the article demonstrate that there are obvious inconsistencies in how identity is viewed across disciplines. For example, socio-political approaches argue that every additional language broadens the scope of the person's identity and opens an opportunity to introduce this identity at the international level. Studies in psycholinguistics specifically highlight that multilingualism is a feature of the human mind. Therefore, speaking more than one languages is possible for any human being anywhere in the world.

The variety of approaches to the problem of socio-political and socio-linguistic aspects of one's identity motivate special research in this area. Such questions as 'what exactly count as constituents of one's identity; whether knowledge of foreign languages changes the person's self-identity; whether proficiency in an additional language influences the individual's identity' are awaiting their answers.

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¹⁰ Yang G. How Do Language Learning, Teaching, and Transnational Experiences (Re)shape an EFLer's Identities. *A Critical Ethnographic Narrative* // Sage Open. July-September, 2021. Pp. 1-9. P. 6.

¹¹ Ivanchenko V. "Global Russians": from cosmopolitanism to patriotism // Russian Council on Foreign Relations. July 28, 2018 URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/riacdigest/globalnye-russkie-ot-kosmopolitizma-k-patriotizmu/>

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AUTHORS:

Sokolova Marina Yuryevna, PhD, Researcher, Member of Bilingualism and Language Contact Lab, University of Illinois at Chicago (Chicago, USA); Data-Linguist, Amazon Development Center (online, New York, USA); Lecturer, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (online, Barcelona, Spain).

Saakyan Armen Kolyaevich, Doctor of Sociological Sciences, Professor, Professor of the Yerevan Branch of Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (Yerevan, Armenia)

Korshunov Dmitry Sergeevich, Candidat of Political Science, Associate Professor, Chair of the Department of International Relations and Regional Studies at Nizhny Novgorod Linguistics University (Nizhny Novgorod, Russia)