

Identity among bilinguals: An ecolinguistic approach

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Abstract

Identity building among speakers of “lesser used languages” is, in many aspects, incomparable among European minority groups, since many differing research approaches characterize the ethnolinguistic and cultural identities of minorities. In the same way, as contact linguistics by means of the *Euromosaic report* has revealed, there are several entirely different European language policies within the EU, and as a consequence, the identity of minority speakers has been defined in different ways depending on the nation state concepts of the EU member states. We would like to discuss some internal and external aspects of identity conflicts which can be observed among autochthonous minority members in Europe. It will be shown that these features are of prime importance for the construction of a cultural-linguistic identity within those minority groups who are trying to avoid assimilation through identity building, meanwhile they are trying to be socialized citizens, and accepted by the majority speakers. Can such identity conflicts be overcome by means of effective language planning?

Key words: identity building, autochthonous minority groups, identity conflicts, language planning.

Resumo

A construción da identidade entre os falantes de “linguas menos usadas” é, en moitos aspectos, incomparable entre os grupos minoritarios europeos, dende o momento en que moi diferentes aproximacións investigadoras caracterizan as identidades etno-lingüísticas e culturais das minorías. Do mesmo xeito, como a lingüística do contacto a través do *Informe Euromosaic* revelou, hai moitas e completamente diferentes políticas lingüísticas dentro da Unión Europea, e a consecuencia é que a identidade dos falantes minoritarios veu sendo definida de xeitos diferentes dependendo dos conceptos de estado nacional dos estados membros da Unión Europea. Gustaríanos debater algúns aspectos internos e externos dos conflitos identitarios que se poden observar entre membros de minorías autóctonas en Europa. Mostraremos que estes trazos son de fundamental importancia para a construción dunha identidade lingüístico-cultural dentro destes grupos minoritarios que intentan evitar a asimilación a través da construción da súa identidade, mentres que ó mesmo tempo intentan ser cidadáns socializados, e aceptados polos falantes maioritarios. ¿Poden tales conflitos de identidade ser superados a través dunha planificación lingüística axeitada?

Palabras clave: construción da identidade, grupos autóctonos minoritarios, conflitos identitarios, planificación lingüística.

1. Introduction

All European countries –Portugal and Iceland perhaps excepted– are multilingual and multicultural. In rural European areas of the periphery or along linguistic boundaries a

diglossic situation is often observed, a situation which has been preserved up to the 1990's in certain areas –despite significant social change all over Europe. Language maintenance and language shift (LMLS) has been better viewed in urban areas where multilingualism (all large cities in Europe became multilingual to a certain degree) influenced feelings of identity in several ways. The former monolingual urban citizen developed, depending on contextual and situational factors, several distinctive, separating or overlapping identities. The results of this process we term multi-identity. Accordingly, citizens of Brussels could present themselves according to the situation and conversational partner as a “Brusselaar” (local identity), “Brabander” (regional identity), a Fleming (national identity), a Belgian (citizenship, geographical identity and possibly multilingual identity), as a European (supranational identity) or finally, as a mixture of several of these identities.

The urban environment and the numerous changes in modern society have doubtlessly influenced speakers of autochthonous European languages who often live in rural and/or peripheral areas. However, do rural minority language speakers undergoing serious language shift develop strategies to maintain their linguistic and cultural identity? I will focus on a bilingual (French/German) group in order to ascertain in what way these bilinguals (and occasionally multilinguals) succeed in preserving their “oppressed” language and in maintaining their identity.

My starting point will be Contact Linguistics. One of the most fruitful research approaches within its framework seems to be Language Ecology. Haugen, Haarmann and Mackey discuss respectively minority language speakers' identity, language death and LMLS from an ecolinguistic perspective. Haarmann, moreover, is convinced that a comprehensive framework of identity relations could be established in terms of ecology (Haarmann, 1986: 1). In this paper I will neither define or redefine the term nor review ecolinguistic historiography. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the fact that an ecolinguistic approach in Contact Linguistics could prove useful in addition to the traditional research methods in our field. As an illustration I will present a summary of the results of the Brussels Research Centre on Multilingualism's (R.C.M.) field work along the Germanic-Romance linguistic boundary in Southern Belgium, known as South Old Belgium (West and Southwest parts of Belgian Luxembourg, an officially monolingual French-speaking province of the Kingdom of Belgium). Special attention had to be paid to both internal and external factors for which the linguistic household, or ecolinguistic conditions, may be responsible.

I would like to put forward the argument here that an ecological viewpoint is not of paramount importance for the description of stable, diglossic or multilingual linguistic areas or open bilingual conflict zones, but rather for the description of linguistic/ethnic contact areas in which one or more languages or language varieties are in danger, not as the apparent result of political decision –linguistic, administrative, representative or otherwise. The identity of these minority language speakers can be described as linguistically and culturally mixed. All domains can be ranked in function of a strict language use: for example, minority language in the family, majority language in public and in education, both languages in bars and in the work place.

If such a minority group continues to maintain its bilingual and bicultural identity, one should ask how this phenomenon could be investigated.

2. Identity and language census

Firstly, the typical bilingualism and multilingualism of European minority areas defies strict, mother-tongue categorization as most diglossic behaviour is characterised by *functional distribution*: specific everyday speech situations and conditions continually require the same linguistic variants, so that the use of more than one language appears institutionalized. There are only a few language areas that allow a permanent, free alternation between variants for economic reasons. Consequently, the results of a poll and the differences identified between second and first language speakers are less relevant (Nelde, 1980: 201-209).

Secondly, any given answer to a question regarding day-to-day language use is subject to such a complexity of sociological criteria –especially in conflict zones– that even surveys by trained interviewers can lead to skewed results. On replying, the informant will certainly not be thinking of the problems of linguistic variety in his use of language as seen by the interviewer. Rather, consciously or unconsciously, he will maintain a certain loyalty to his group and strive to attain the goal of social identity. Neither Linguistics nor Sociology have the necessary models and methods at their disposal to come to terms with extra-linguistic conditions. Census statistics on individual linguistic behaviour demonstrate more about social identity than about the true language use of the informant.

An example taken from a bilingual village (German dialect and French standard) in South Old Belgium not far from the town Arel/Arlon illustrates the difficulties arising from the interpretation of such statistical distortion:

Two types of researchers asked questions concerning the language use in one street of the village. The first researcher, investigating the right side of the street, represented a special type of interviewer dressed as a salesman with a tie, white collar, business suit and briefcase (the German “Demoskop”). Walking from door to door he addressed each inhabitant in perfect French (the prestige variety): –“Bonjour Madame, Monsieur. Vous parlez certainement français, n'est-ce pas?”– and always received an answer in French. The interviewer on the left side of the same street resembled more of a student-type “hippie”: bilingual (Dutch/French) with a fairly good knowledge of German. She addressed all inhabitants in two languages –French, and German, “Bonjour, Guten Tag”– and continued the dialogue in broken German while asking questions about old German songs (“Kinder- und Weihnachtslieder”), fairy tales and legends, and ending with the question “Aber sie verstehen doch Deutsch?” Everyone agreed. A premature conclusion would be that the right hand side of the street speaks French and left side speaks German.

This example shows a facet of the “multi-identity” of the minority language speakers: they are able to adjust to both identities: the one which focuses on the prestige language French (the official and majority language) and a second one focussing on the diglossic situation where both the German vernacular and French can be used.

Accordingly, the speakers have two or more linguistic codes at their disposal and code-switch in many daily situations without difficulty. Thus, a particular (“diglossic”) structure can be seen in this apparently voluntary choice of domains which is contrary to the initial impression of bilingualism: apart from the few unimportant contacts in which all idioms are interchangeable, the linguistic domains of each idiom are clearly distinct from one another and are most often mutually exclusive. The choice of language is determined by so many situational, contextual and other extra-linguistic factors that the code-switch is unlikely outside this structure. Therefore, the choice of language is conditioned more by the place in

which the contact occurs, the presence of other known or unknown persons, the interlocutor, the conversational functions, the social environment, the degree of trust, the intentional expressions and the self-appraisal within the linguistic community, than by linguistic rules outlined by the authorities responsible for language use. Above all, the most intensive communicational linguistic situations of the private and family domain have so far been able to evaders to a great degree, the prestige and social pressure of the official language.

3. Non-linear patterns of a bilingual identity

For more than 160 years, local publications forecasted the decline and attrition of the minority language (in 1833, 1897 and in 1935 to be precise): while the oldest generation still spoke the minority language German (standard or dialectal) the majority high variety French was encroaching on the parental generation along with the domestic dialect, and had already entirely replaced the low variety within the younger generation. If that had been the case, the low variety should not have appeared in the 20th century. Obviously the linguistic development is viewed here in a too linear fashion. The movement by many youths away from the mother-tongue at puberty due to majority language instruction (French) is often compensated for in later years, when they return from an industrial area, take over a parental farm or certain offices and adapt to and identify with a village vernacular. This non-linear linguistic development merits special attention.

4. Preserving identity after language loss

At present, there are eighty-four inhabitants in a hamlet near the Belgian-Luxembourgish city of Arel (in French: Arlon). Each one understands or speaks French. The linguist could hastily deduce that because the entire population speaks French and only three-quarters speak a German dialect, it would be only a matter of time before the local vernacular will die. A closer look at the language use of the most important social interactions in the hamlet indicates, however, that all essential community discussions (rural allotment, building plans, road construction, etc.) take place during a general public meeting conducted in German. Therefore, the monolingual French-speaking group (24 inhabitants) can participate in only a comparatively small part of the hamlet's social planning. Although these monolinguals speak the majority language, they are discriminated against by the bilingual group's language behaviour identifying themselves with the autochthonous inhabitants of the Arel/Arlon county.

Accordingly, the social patterns reflecting the minority speaker's identity did not change albeit the minority language had lost ground. In this way, a cultural conflict may develop because a fast assimilation by the monolingual majority speakers cannot be expected.

5. Socio-economic conditions as identity markers

The socio-economic changes since the technical revolution and their effects and influences on language behaviour deserve explicit attention. The discontinuity of the social and ecological conditions is to be found even in marginal linguistic boundary zones such as South Old Belgium. In the Southeast of South Old Belgium rapid industrialization began between the two world wars and again after World War II. Above all, the steel industry owned by companies in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg expanded in the 1960s. The decline of the homogeneous rural society in the locality and the establishment of industries

along a new highway led to a language shift spanning two generations. Language death was predicted by linguists and politicians. The situation changed, however, when a economic recession halted the expansion and factories either closed or were destroyed. The depression which lasted for more than ten years resulted in a phenomenon which could be described as a “re-agrarisation”: unemployed people returned to their farms and tried to identify with the older local communities by using the local low variety of German. A manner of language shift took place which will probably be repeated several times, making the future situation of the language unforeseeable (Nelde, 1984: 222). This example would imply a dangerous conclusion for the autochthonous minority: in case of ecological and economic change where industrialization and the establishment of a modern technically-oriented society influence the language use and behaviour of the indigenous minorities, the consequence would be a direct relation between the growth of the gross national product and the decline of the mother-tongue. Or when stated the other way around: is socio-economic backwardness necessarily a guarantee for the survival of the low linguistic variety in multilingual areas with a threatened minority?

In addition, the discontinuity of socio-economic and ecological conditions serves as an identity marker depending on which of the two languages and cultures will be strengthened or weakened –it is probable that the identity of the bilinguals will be influenced.

6. Ecolinguistics and identity

The identity feelings of multilingual and multicultural minority language speakers depend not only on socioeconomic conditions but also on ecological changes. Here are three examples from Northern Italy, Eastern France and –again– the minority area of Eastern Belgium showing the strong impact of measures taken by the authorities, which could be defined as ecological encroachments. When language shift towards the majority language takes place it could be caused by ecolinguistic factors resulting in a “majoritization” of the bilingual's identity.

- *Italianization*. During an earthquake almost twenty years ago in Udine (Friuli, Italy) large parts of the city were destroyed. The reconstruction funds for the indigenous population were administered by Italian speaking civil servants from Rome. Their power and prestige led temporarily to an Italianization of the Friulian capital of Udine.

- *Frenchification I*. The construction of a motorway through German speaking Belgium after the Second World War led to the implantation of truck transport and trailer companies and to the industrialization of the motorway corridor. Most of the industrial plants came from the steel and coal hinterland Wallonia; accordingly, the language of the new business was French. Since neither economic recession nor unemployment could stop the socio-economic upheaval in this German speaking region, a Frenchification took and takes place and created a new, French speaking affluent minority.

- *Frenchification II*. There seemed to be a consensus among European governments in East and West in the sixties to build nuclear power plants in the border areas of their countries. Precisely those border areas are often –as we have shown before– minority language regions. For example, France chose for one of their bigger nuclear plants the German speaking part of Lorraine in Eastern France. Just before the ideological debate of the possible construction of such a nuclear power plant started, the R.C.M. investigated the family language in the village of Kattenhofen (French: Cattenom) with the result that more than 68% of the families still used their German dialect in the family domain. With the

implantation of the power plant the only language which could be understood by the decision-makers in Paris had to be French –a language which had to be used by those supporting and opposing the nuclear plant. A recent follow up survey after the construction of the plant showed a further decline of the mother tongue: Frenchification takes now place in the last domain of the minority language –the family.

According to this second R.C.M. survey, only less than 40% of the families still use German at home.

As a motor of identity, language is involved in all these processes. The minority language of the bilingual does not serve solely as a medium to convey ideas and information but also as a vehicle to express feelings and to articulate cultural values. Bilingual minority speakers with their specific multi-identities construct a conceptual model of socio-economic reality in their minds which enables them to identify with changing contexts and situations. This makes the role of language and ecology, of Ecolinguistics in modern processes of identification an extremely important one. The conditions of an increasing socio-economic and ecological awareness among minority groups and the “pull and push” processes of identification in a rapidly changing world are affecting LMLS and also the status and corpus of minority languages and consequently become decisive for language planning and language policy in the future.

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