

## **What is the identity of a heritage language speaker?**

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Researchers in the areas of second language acquisition, language studies, and heritage language education discussing the connections between language and identity highlight that identity is dynamic and socially constructed (e.g., Achugar, 2006; Berard, 2005; Block, 2007; Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Norton, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995; Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004; Valdés, 2001; Wallace, 2004; Weiyn He, 2006).

Researchers also state that identity is negotiated in discourse and thus influenced by language, which creates the medium for its negotiation (Belz, 2002; Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Djité, 2006; Joseph, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004; Shi, 2006; Warschauer, 2000). Understanding of these features of identity is particularly important when considering identities of heritage language speakers, as it is necessary to account for a "set of ambiguities and complications" (Weiyun He, 2006, The Learner of Chinese section, para. 4) that arise when individuals speak and interact with two or more languages. Thus, in order to better understand language development of and use by heritage language speakers, it is important to understand how language identity develops. This brief reviews critical contemporary approaches to understanding of identity and discusses specific characteristics of heritage language identity from the perspective of a narrative approach.

### **Identity as dynamic and socially constructed**

Contemporary scholarship offers a variety of ways to understand identity. For example, Norton (2000) views identity as a person's understanding of his/her "relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed in time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Crawshaw, Callen, and Tusting (2001) follow Hall and du Gay (1996) in describing identity as a process of identifying or not identifying with a particular position in life and continually negotiating and modifying this position and attitudes toward it. Djité (2006) refers to Joseph's (2006) understanding of identity as a category to which a person belongs, stressing that one belongs to a number of social categories based on, for example, gender, ethnicity, nationality, cultural heritage, age, occupation, and social status. One has multiple identity positions and moves among these in different social contexts (Berard, 2005; New London Group, 1996; Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2006; Warschauer, 2000). Thus, identity is a "process of association and opposition" (Achugar, 2006, p. 100) and of constant negotiation, production, and performance (Crawshaw et al., 2001) rather than a static category of possession. Identity is dynamic and changes depending on the goals of interaction and the situations in which individuals and groups find themselves.

According to De Fina (2003); Noels, Pon, and Clement (1996); Norris (2003); Turner (1999); and Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (1999), the concept of self is the central concept of identity. It reflects understanding of personal position, goals, and roles in a society and allows for negotiation of who one is in connection to others (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001). It allows for self-positioning and self-categorization, the processes that take place in the effort to negotiate the self and the status quo (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002; Rosenblum & Travis, 2006; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003; Turner, 1999). Van Lier (n.d.) particularly stresses that the self and identity should not be used interchangeably, as "the self is a reference point, and identity is a family of processes and activities that co-reference and co-create self and world in a number of ways" (p. 2). At the same time, we cannot describe identity without describing the self. Neither can we "describe self without describing agency. A person and his or her actions define each other" (van Lier, n.d., p. 4).

Agency can be understood as a "way to talk about human capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 7). This ability to act is at the core of any social transaction, can have social, cultural, and linguistic constraints, and can be found in sociocultural and linguistic practices (Ahearn, 2001). Following Belz's (2002) discussion of identity, role, and voice (introduced by Kramersch, 2003), it is possible to suggest that agency is realized through voice, "the ability to author or make meaning, to choose which role will be enacted in which way in which institutional context" (Belz, 2002, p. 18). In other words, voice is the "linguistically constituted self" (Lantolf, 1993, p. 223).

### **Linguistically constructed identity**

As seen from this discussion, researchers highlight the fact that identity, self, and agency are linguistically constructed and negotiated. They view the connection between identity and language as "an intimate and mutually constitutive relation" (Belz, 2002, p. 16), especially since language has important symbolic value (Wei, 2000) and plays a crucial role in establishing one's place and role in society (Djité, 2006). This influences social identity, and such identity variables as ethnicity, gender, class, education, and cultural background contribute to one's social status. In a narrative approach, identity is viewed as a continuous process "of discursive construction involving voluntary acts of self-differentiation through language" (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001, p. 101). Researchers view language not only as the medium of identity negotiation, but also as the source of identity interpretation of others and by others (Joseph, 2006; Warschauer, 2000). At the same time, following a poststructuralist approach to language and identity, researchers claim that language is the site of identity construction, the main battleground for its negotiation (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Ros i Solé, 2004; Shi, 2006).

Since people realize their identities via language choices and construction of utterances, the languages that they speak also create reality for them by offering certain semantic and pragmatic elements for their use and self-expression

(Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Djité, 2006; Ros i Solé, 2004). Moreover, since language and culture are "co-constructed and mutually contextualized" (Shi, 2006, p. 4), one navigates within different systems of social distributions within a language community.

Speakers of more than one language, including heritage language speakers, who are raised in a home or community in which a language other than English is spoken (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001), navigate within and among different language communities. Heritage language speakers negotiate their own identities in connection to these different languages and their power relations and social distributions in society. Thus, it is crucial to understand identity and the processes of identity negotiation within and among language communities.

### **Heritage language use and identity negotiation**

The identity of heritage language speakers is co-constructed and contextualized as they maintain and build connections with both or multiple languages and cultures. In order to better understand the complexity of these processes, researchers discuss two important concepts for heritage language speakers: language as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1999) and "subject positioning" (Maguire & Curdt-Christiansen, 2007, p. 50). The latter describes the personal understanding of self and expression of agency.

#### ***Language as cultural capital***

Language capital is part of one's cultural capital, where identity is developed, described, and contested. (Cultural capital is a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, in which he extends the understanding of capital in economic terms to "a form of power as capital in differentiated societies" [Swartz, 1997, p. 75]. See also Bourdieu, 1993.) For heritage language speakers in the United States, this can create personal struggle, as they belong simultaneously to at least two language communities: those of the majority and one or more minority languages. Bourdieu's (1999) notion of the "linguistic market" (p. 39) explains this struggle as it describes the different social values of languages. Speakers of two or more languages become aware of different societal linguistic attitudes that assign value to different languages and empower speakers of prestigious majority languages that have valued language capital. Thus, "language forms a kind of wealth" (p. 43) and legitimizes the use of the majority language while devaluing the use of minority or heritage languages.

In the United States, the language with valued cultural capital is English, and other languages do not have as much cultural or market value. The consequence is loss of languages other than English within the first and second generations (those of individuals who immigrated to the United States and of U.S.-born children of immigrants respectively), since the speakers of those languages, and society in general, do not see them to be as valuable as English (Bourdieu, 1999). (For a detailed discussion of language loss, see the Heritage Brief: *What is language loss?*)

This illustrates how language attitudes and choices of heritage language speakers are influenced by social attitudes toward their language(s).

These social attitudes do not only exist in mainstream U.S. society; they also exist among speakers of heritage languages and reflect language norms and attitudes toward more and less prestigious dialects. Thus, similar to a tendency to value English over heritage languages, a more prestigious variety of a heritage language, or higher levels of literacy in the language, are valued over certain dialects and specific grammatical, word, and pragmatic choices (Colombi & Roca, 2003; Hidalgo, 1997; Valdés, 1997). These attitudes can result in some heritage language speakers being considered to be "other" and positioned outside the heritage language community. This is another site of struggle and identity negotiation for heritage language speakers. As Kelleher and Haynes describe (see the Heritage Brief: *What are similarities and differences among English language, foreign language, and heritage language education in the United States?*), language speakers might be at very different levels of language proficiency and have different social and ethnic backgrounds within their communities. Thus, heritage language speakers negotiate their identities not only in connection with social ideologies within an English-speaking community, but also within their heritage language communities. This illustrates how complex identity negotiation and subject (or self-) positioning can be, since they are tied to expectations of different language communities regarding language choices.

Heritage language identity is highly influenced by language ideologies present in the society (Gee, 2007; Potowski, 2007; Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998; Wake, 2009) and by heritage language ideologies that include personal and family language attitudes and use. According to Valdés (2001), bilingual-bicultural individuals are situated in a language continuum in which the choice of a language depends on socio-cultural contexts and the strength of identification with and connection to the heritage culture and language.

Developing a bilingual identity in a society that devalues heritage languages is a difficult task. Language choices of heritage speakers reflect different levels of agency they are able to develop and express. Choosing to position themselves within heritage culture, sustain the knowledge of a heritage language, and use the heritage language while being bilingual and fluent in English is agency. This agency expressed by language and culture choices is in contrast with what members of the dominant language and culture expect from other members. Thus, as Maguire and Curdt-Christiansen (2007) explain, "cultural positioning and identity politics in heritage language contexts" (Ideological Becoming section, para. 2) reveal not only personal identity choices, they also illustrate how heritage language speakers relate to their cultural heritage and cultural and linguistic social prejudice. These struggles influence and become a part of identity negotiation of speakers of different languages.

Language identity is developed in constant dialogic interaction among social constraints, personal language choice, and personal agency. Bakhtin (1982) defines language as "the uninterrupted process of historically becoming" (p. 288), since

living languages combine a multiplicity of ideologies and social belief systems. Becoming is the process of using the language that continues throughout the whole life of a person. When we discuss language attitudes and language ideology, we need to talk about "authoritative discourse" (p. 342), the socially appropriate discourse of the dominant culture and language community. The dominant culture and language are the ones of "the other" in contrast to the heritage language self. For example, schools are the main engines of disseminating the authoritative discourse by means of "appropriation and transmission" (p. 341), while families and heritage language communities might be the ones to maintain heritage language discourse.

Heritage languages belong to a heritage culture and are used and preserved mostly by families, community members, or heritage language schools. The disparity between authoritative discourse and heritage discourse is what constantly constrains heritage language speakers. The development of a dual language identity depends on the degree to which heritage speakers are able to find coherence and continuity in multiple discursive worlds. It also depends on whether heritage language speakers are able to develop hybrid situated non-conflicted identities within the dominant and heritage sociocultural discourses (Weiyun He, 2006). As Weiyun He (2006) highlights, most heritage language learners describe their interest in maintaining and learning their heritage language because of their cultural identity, as they would like to stay connected to their heritage culture. Thus, the degree of language maintenance and development achieved is tied to how much contact the person has with the heritage language and its cultural community.

Cultural identity, which is a variable within a more overarching social identity, does not necessarily require proficiency in the heritage language, as some may identify with a heritage community even when they are English monolinguals. Considering this aspect, heritage language identity involves not only heritage language knowledge and fluency, but also some level of affiliation with and connection to the heritage culture. Valdés (2001) explains that since maintenance of the heritage language and ties with the heritage language and culture are left to the individual and the family, it is almost impossible to reproduce the whole scope of sociocultural and interpersonal realities to transmit and acquire a heritage language in the way the first language is transmitted. Thus, balanced bilingualism is a concept that is not always realized. Bilingual proficiency falls into a continuum and depends on how much contact the person has with and what attitudes the person has towards the two languages (Valdés, 2001).

Since the heritage language may be the means of communication within the family, the loss of it can translate into loss of communication among family members and can have an impact on children's development and behavior (Shin, 2005). Negative childhood experiences associated with the heritage language (such as misunderstandings, embarrassments, or humiliation connected with the language or culture either in the dominant cultural environment or among speakers of the language) can lead to decreased identification with the heritage language and culture. Under these difficult conditions, the process of bicultural and bilingual

identity negotiation involves shifting from one language to the other and navigating among different aspects and layers of identity.

### ***Subject positioning***

Subject (or self-) positioning is an important component of the identity negotiation that takes place in the effort to negotiate the self and the status quo (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002; Oakes, 2001; Rosenblum & Travis, 2006; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappan, 2003; Turner, 1999; Wallace, 2001). It occurs constantly on a variety of levels within the system of social distributions, since people categorize themselves as belonging to some groups and not belonging to others. This self-positioning inside some groups and outside of others is based on such identity variables as ethnicity, nationality, cultural background, age, gender, and class. At the same time that individuals and groups define "the self," they also define "the other," outsiders who do not belong to their groups. Thus, as Oakes (2001) points out, in the process of subject positioning, people build their identities based on inclusions and exclusions. Understanding of "the self" and of "the other" are two crucial processes that go hand in hand.

On the one hand, heritage language speakers can consider themselves members of heritage language and culture groups based on their connection to the heritage culture. On the other, they can consider themselves different from their heritage language community and position themselves within the mainstream culture. Variables that underlie these choices can be age, ethnicity, affiliation with the cultural background, gender, or class. Thus, subject positioning contributes to the development of heritage language speakers' "self-concept" (Turner, 1999, p. 30) and provides another opportunity to express agency.

For example, Wallace (2001) describes several types of subject positioning based on self-identification with heritage and mainstream cultures.

- In the *home base/visitor's base model*, heritage language speakers consider one culture (mainstream or of the heritage language) as the home base in which they are most comfortable operating. The other culture becomes a frequently visited environment in which the attachment to cultural practices, including language, is not as strong as in the home base cultural environment.
- In the *feet in both worlds model*, heritage language speakers balance their identity in both cultures in almost equal amounts. They feel at ease in both cultural environments speaking the dominant and the heritage languages.
- In the *life on the border model*, heritage language speakers position themselves on the edge of the two cultures, sometimes creating a border culture. This is challenging, as the process of identity negotiation is always on the edge and requires a balancing act.
- The *shifting identity gears* model is the most comfortable for heritage language identity, since one is able to swiftly shift identity according to the linguistic and cultural context.

It is hard to imagine heritage language speakers identifying with only one culture, as the heritage language identity requires negotiation between at least two languages and cultures. As Wallace (2001) illustrates, heritage language speakers belong to the dominant discourse community and the one of the heritage language at the same time and sometimes even find themselves in between these discourse communities. Hence, identity is negotiated based on a multicultural view of the self in order to make sense of the disparities that heritage language speakers deal with.

## Conclusion

In summary, the identity of heritage language speakers involves the process of constant negotiation and self-positioning within a multicultural/bicultural environment, where language fluency and choices indicate affiliation with and the level of connection to mainstream and heritage language groups. By positioning themselves as insiders or outsiders in relation to heritage and mainstream cultures, heritage language speakers engage in the process of constant becoming and negotiation of their fluid and multilayered heritage language identities. This process demonstrates the complexities and challenges involved in subject positioning that influence language choices and expression of agency. It is the process of constant negotiation with the self and the other.

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