

MAINTAINING THE IDENTITY OF BILINGUAL INDIVIDUALS IN MULTICULTURAL/MULTILINGUAL SETTINGS

Ika Kana Trisnawati

*Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Banda Aceh, Indonesia
Ika.arraniry@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ways bilingual people are able to maintain their identity within any multicultural and multilingual environment. As today's societies have shown to have more people with varied language/cultural backgrounds, it is interesting to learn how the bilinguals understand and identify themselves despite living in a totally different environment. Data in this paper came from a number of multicultural/multilingual settings for comparison purposes. Findings showed that there have been three major factors contributing to maintain the bilinguals' identity in a diverse environment including language, family, and peer interaction.

Keywords: *bilingual; identity; multicultural/multilingual settings*

INTRODUCTION

Our world nowadays has developed more and more multicultural and multilingual settings. Common causes for these trends are globalisation, migration, refugee, geographical and social mobility and also the spread of education from around the world (Hamers & Blanc, 2004). According to Warttman (2005 in Rivers, 2008), the number of people living outside their country of origin has doubled, increasing up to 191 million over the past 50 years. Further, these multicultural and multilingual settings have resulted in the emergence of bilingual (and multilingual)

individuals. The emergence of bilinguals is not an unexpected phenomenon since diverse languages of people from different places come into contact within multicultural and multilingual settings. With the process of assimilation, people living outside their home countries try to blend and socialize with natives of the new country.

One of their efforts to assimilate is through the language of the new country. As a means of communication, language is seen as an act to show one's identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985 as cited in Wei, 2005). The use of language to refer one's identity is because speakers of different languages are in contact in one environment, creating a unique society, and that they have the need to identify themselves from others who are not (or do not share) similar attributes with them (e. g. culture, ethnic). In relation to above discussion, this study, however, only focuses on the issue of how individuals with the ability to speak in both the language of their ancestry and the language of the new place (or bilingual) maintain their identity in multicultural/multilingual settings. As Danièle Juteau (1994 as cited in Gérin-Lajoie, 2005, p. 903) has stated that "... although minorities share common characteristics, namely the way they relate to the majority group, it would be a mistake to ignore the existence of categories specific to minorities, highlighting the diversity and specificity of hierarchical social modes that pertain to these groups." In particular, it is interesting to see what efforts that these bilingual have in order to stand with their own identity in a place where national/cultural borders are rather blurry and susceptible to changes (Rosenthal & Cichello, 1986) due to the process of assimilation of a large number of speakers of different languages.

Problem and its Context

The main issue being the concern of this study is related to how bilingual (or multilinguals) individuals maintain their cultural/ethnic identity in the multicultural/multilingual settings. Supporting evidence for this study is gathered from various relevant multicultural/multilingual contexts. Thus, the context of this study is not limited to one particular country/setting, but it covers other similar settings which have multicultural/multilingual societies (e. g. the United States, Canada, Australia). It is understood that different societies will have different policies

or considerations for bilingual/multilingual cases; however, the issue of maintaining identity of bilinguals living in multicultural/multilingual environments will have more or less similar answers regardless how different those societies are.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Theories of Social, Cultural and Ethnic Identity

Although the term “identity” may be a simple word, it nevertheless involves a very complex understanding before an individual may refer him/herself to “what” or “which” identity. Hamers and Blanc (2004, p. 200) refers the concept of identity to “the psychological processes involved in the construction of the self with regard to group membership.” This concept is highly related to popular social identity notion developed by Tajfel (1974) which is defined as “a part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 69). According to Tajfel (1974), identity is associated with group membership where an individual wants his/her image to be represented in. Further, Tajfel (1974) mentions that an individual may choose to remain if the groups are able to offer him/her positive effects or to leave if the social groups do not satisfy his/her positive views. However, leaving the groups may not be possible for some reasons; therefore, an individual should change interpretations of what he/she views as unsatisfactory in the groups more positively or accept it as it is and engage in social situations for getting more desirable outcomes of the groups.

Tajfel’s (1974) descriptions of individuals’ self-identification are similar to what Le Page (1968, as cited in Hamers & Blanc, 2004) has stated, that the individual’s behaviour is based on the characteristics of the group where he/she prefers to be identified with. In addition, Le Page explains that this individual’s awareness is able to allow him/her to the extent that “(a) he can identify the groups, (b) he has adequate access to the groups and the ability to analyse their behavioural patterns; (c) his motivation to join the groups is sufficiently powerful and is either reinforced or reversed by feedback from the groups; and (d) he has the ability to modify his behaviour” (p. 201).

A particular point can be made in terms of social identity and culture that, according to Hamers and Blanc (2004), the existence of social identity in the same society can help the individual to define him/herself “in relation to the roles and social groups in that society”; however, the individual will only be aware of his/her own cultural identity “to the extent that one becomes cognisant of the existence of other cultures inside or outside one’s own society” (p. 201). This cultural identity is a part of social identity consisting of diverse characteristics which includes, and not limited to, ancestry, territoriality, institutions, values, norms and languages.

A close concept to cultural identity is ethnic identity. However, ethnic identity specifically refers to physiognomic features or common ancestry (Hamers & Blanc, 2004). Ethnic identity is also a part of social identity and by definition, it can be said as “a subjective sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the feelings and attitudes that accompany this sense of group membership” (Phinney, 1990 as cited in Phinney, Romero, Nava & Huang, 2001, p. 136). This attribution of ethnicity also plays a significant role for the individual’s self-concept of identity. For a clearer description, Giles and Johnson (1981 in Hamers & Blanc, 2004) depict that when individuals state that they belong to ethnic group A rather than B, it means that they want to be treated as A people not B, want that others interpret and judge their behaviours as A’s not B’s, and that they share systems of symbols and meaning, norms and rules, which are normatively associated with the community A.

Language and Identity

The relationship of language and an individual’s identity has been described by Giles and Johnson’s (1981) in their ethnolinguistic theory. Still related to Tajfel’s (1974) social identity theory, Giles and Johnson (1981, as cited in Hansen & Liu, 1997) propose the ethnolinguistic identity theory which claims that language is the prominent marker of group membership and social identity of an individual. In other words, the theory states that it is through language that cultural and ethnic identity can be identified. In addition, Hamers and Blanc (2004) provide two examples which use language as the core value in determining individuals’ cultural identity such as the Flemings in Belgium and the Quebecois in Canada, who had their national identity exclusively based on their linguistic rights.

However, as language becomes an important marker for group membership, Giles and Johnson (1981) argue that the individual could have “linguistic adaptations that may result in subtractive bilingualism or even language erosion if a large number of members of a particular group assimilate into another to achieve a more positive group identity” (in Hansen & Liu, 1997, p. 568). This impact can easily be seen in situations where various cultures come into contact, like multicultural societies. However, as stated by Hamers and Blanc (2004, p. 203), the significance of language for determining identity should not be viewed as a static phenomenon and that it is flexible to the context where the identity is expressed. Mostly, language is used as a group identity when there are intercultural and interethnic interactions. In these settings, Giles and Coupland (1991) mention four reasons for the salience of language consisting of “an attribute of group membership, a cue for ethnic categorisation, an emotional dimension of identity and a means of in group cohesion” (as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2004, p. 204).

Being Bilingual

Taking into account the role of language for defining an individual’s identity, it may not be difficult to consider oneself as a member of ethnic group A if he/she has the ability to speak language A if monolingual. Examples of language as the core feature for a group’s identity has been shown like the Flemings in Belgium and the Quebecois in Canada (Hamers & Blanc, 2004). But, it will be different for individuals who have the ability to speak more than one language or those who are bilinguals. To which group should those individuals refer themselves to have been a concern faced by many bilingual individuals.

The term “bilingual” used in this context is also used to refer to “multilinguals” although primarily, being bilingual is to describe an individual “with the possession of two languages” (Wei, 2005, p. 6). Being bilingual can also be understood from Bloomfield’s (1933 in Mackey, 2005, p. 22) notion of bilingualism which is to have “the native-like control of two languages.” However, this definition can be extended to having three, four and more languages in varying degree of proficiency as a multilingual (Wei, 2005). A broader concept for bilingualism is proposed by Haugen (1953) who stated that being a bilingual is being able to

produce “complete meaningful utterances in the other language” (as cited in Mackey, 2005, p. 22). Then, Diebold (1961) includes simple “passive-knowledge” of the written language or any “contact with possible models in a second language and the ability to use these in the environment of the native language” (as cited in Mackey, 2005, p. 22). These varied definitions show that there is no definite notion of how to consider any individual as bilingual. Mackey (1956, as cited in Mackey, 2005) states that the concept of bilingualism is relative. This consideration is because bilingualism relates to the “degree” which an individual shows his/her proficiency in using the languages, to the “function” where he/she uses the languages to, to the “alternation” which shows how he/she changes from one language to another, and to the “interference” which shows his/her ability to control the languages he/she is using (p. 23).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

One of the important contributors in maintaining bilingual identity is *language*. Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) state that “in-group speech can serve as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural solidarity. It is used for reminding the group about its cultural heritage, for transmitting group feelings, and for excluding members of the out group from its internal transactions” (as cited in Phinney *et. al.*, 2001, p. 137).

A study by Imbens-Bailey (1996) tried to find out the significance of being proficient in Armenian on bilingual Armenian-American children. The study showed that these bilingual individuals felt a closer affinity with the Armenian community than monolingual of English. Further, the study mentioned that to reinforce ethnic identity, it could be done by having knowledge of the ancestral language. Similarly, a study conducted by Bankston and Zhou (1995) on first and second generation of Vietnamese youth in New Orleans indicated that there was a strong connection between language and ethnic identity and that the ethnic language could be an access to the ethnic community. In regard to this, Portes and Schauflier (1994) state that “retention of one’s ethnic language can be seen as a cultural resource” (as cited in Phinney *et. al.*, 2001, p. 138). However, the status of language can also

affect bilingual people's attitude towards their own identity within a society where one language is superior over another as the case in Eidheim's 1979/1994a findings. Eidheim (1979/1994a) found that the Sami who spoke Lappish did not use their mother tongue whenever the local Norwegians were present since Lappish was considered "low" status compared to the superior Norwegian (as cited in Danbolt, 2011). Nevertheless, language competence is still crucial to establish bilinguals' identity since the status of the language also highly depends on the ability of bilinguals to maintain the language itself (Danbolt, 2011).

Another important contributor for cultural identity maintenance is related to *family*. Phinney *et. al.* (2001) consider parental attitudes to be an important factor to ethnic identity as can be seen from their Armenian subjects living in the U.S. These Armenian parents showed a high influence in preserving the identity of their children by enrolling them in Armenian language schools. This also conforms the opinion of Rosenthal & Cichello (1986, p. 488) that "parents' retention or rejection of the culture" can be viewed by their children as "a statement of the value of the group"; thus, this primary socialisation within a family can help bilingual individuals to develop a more positive sense to their ethnic/cultural identity..

Social interaction among peers is also an additional contributor for cultural identity maintenance. Alba (1990 in Phinney *et. al.*, 2001) states that social interaction of same-ethnic peers can strengthen ethnic identity. This proposition is supported by the research on three ethnic groups in Los Angeles, USA (Armenian, Vietnamese and Mexican) conducted by Phinney *et. al.* (2001) which showed that peer interaction in one's own ethnic group was proved to have a significant relationship to ethnic identity more than the influence of their own ethnic language. The interaction among peers provides exposure to the different cultural experiences not found at home and also assists bilinguals to be more confident in being themselves (Desai, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Bilingual individuals are clearly to have advantages due to their linguistic competence in more than one language. However, it may not be the case in terms of identification of their cultural or ethnic identity. Being a bilingual who lives in multicultural/multilingual settings is perhaps a challenge to an individual's identity. This is due to the fact that the bilingual individuals are exposed to the environments where one language may be dominant to another, and this can create a bigger concern if the individual's ethnic language belongs to the minority group. As many studies have revealed, in the case where bilingual individuals need to identify their ethnic language while living in multicultural/multilingual settings, it is important to maintain their cultural/ethnic identity through several suggestions comprising developing their own ethnic language proficiency, parental guidance for their own ethnic/cultural maintenance, and interacting socially with their same ethnic peers.

As discussed above, language is believed to be a prominent indicator for defining one's identity, in this case the culture/ethnic; yet, language is not necessarily the only factor to maintain one's identity in multicultural/multilingual settings. Internal and external sources from family and peers are no less salient for keeping one's identity stronger amidst blurry boundaries of multicultural identities. Of all these recommendations, it is particularly useful to highlight that individual bilinguals need to develop their ethnolinguistic awareness for the sake of maintaining their identity within any multicultural/multilingual settings.

REFERENCES

- Bankston, C., and Zhou, M. (1995). Effects of minority language literacy on the academic achievement of Vietnamese youths in New Orleans, *Sociology of Education*, 68(1), pp. 1–17
- Danbolt, L. D. (2011). The challenge of bilingualism in a multilingual society: The Bolivian Case. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, ISSN 1404-1634, Issue 27, retrieved August 7, 2017 from <https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr27/drang-27.htm>
- Desai, S. U. (2013). Effect of Socialization on Ethnic Identity Formation while Participating in an Ethnic Social Organization, (Master's thesis), Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
- Gérin-Lajoie, D. (2005). Bilingual identity among youth in minority settings: a complex notion. *ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on*

- Bilingualism*, Cohen, J., Mcalister, K. T., Rolstad, K. & Macswan, J.(ed).
Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, pp. 902-913
- Hamers, J. F., & Blanc, M. H. A. (2004). *Bilinguality and Bilingualism*. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press.
- Hansen, J. G. & Liu, J. (1997). Social Identity and Language: theoretical and
methodological issues. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, pp. 567–576
- Imbens-Bailey, A. (1996). Ancestral language acquisition: Implications for aspects of
ethnic identity among Armenian American children and adolescents, *Journal
of Language and Social Psychology*, 15(4), pp. 422–443
- Mackey, W. F. (2005). The description of bilingualism. InL. Wei (Ed.), *The
Bilingualism Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Phinney, J. S., Romero, R., Nava, M., & Huang, D. (2001). The role of language,
parents, and peers in ethnic identity among adolescents in immigrant
families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(2), pp. 135-153
- Rosenthal, D.A. & Cichello, A.M. (1986). The meeting of two cultures: ethnic identity
and psychosocial adjustment of Italian-Australian adolescents. *International
Journal of Psychology*, 21, pp. 487-501
- Rivers, D. J. (2008). English as an international business language (EIBL): The need
for an increase in theoretical and practical research focusing on written
business communications across cultural boundaries in relation to
multinational corporate language selection. *The Asian ESP Journal*, 4(2), pp.
6-22
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science
Information*, 13, pp. 65-93
- Wei, L. (2005). Dimensions of bilingualism. InL. Wei (Ed.), *The bilingualism reader*.
New York: Routledge.