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Language and Identity Explored

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between language and identity is widely discussed in applied linguistics, sociology, communications and other related scholarly fields. Furthermore, many researchers have focused on the post-Soviet region, which given its unique historical context allows for testing of this relationship. The widespread bilingualism as a result of historical russification and the linguistic transformations that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union make the region a 'sociolinguistic playground'. Recent events in Ukraine have given grounds to further explore this relationship, now in attempt to link language and identity as potential forces for geopolitical change in the region. This paper presents an overview of existing research, theories, and opposing perspectives related to the relationship between language and identity, and considers complications such as historical russification, religious influence, socioeconomic factors, and education with regards to the Ukrainian and post-Soviet context. I aim to illustrate the significance of language and its effects on socio-political change in the case of Ukraine, by presenting arguments and complications in support of the relationship between language and identity.

Key words: Language, identity, collective identity, Russification, bilingualism, Ukraine, Post-Soviet states.

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1.0 Introduction

The relationship between language and identity is one that is thoroughly discussed in applied linguistics, sociology, communications and other related scholarly fields. While a large amount of work has been

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laid to support and better understand this relationship and link it to historical events, such studies are often disjoint in presenting theoretical background and discussing historical or current events. Recently, there have been dramatic changes in the geopolitical course and state of Ukraine, and I believe this may be linked to the linguistic and cultural phenomena in post-Soviet states. This essay, therefore, aims to further explore the relationship between language and identity, discuss issues faced in linguistic research, present other cases in support of this relationship, and apply them to the events in Ukraine. I believe understanding the relationship between language and identity may illustrate the significance of language and its effects on political and social change.

The notion of the relationship between language and identity has been outlined by several distinct theories. One of these theories is the concept of a discourse community, developed by sociolinguist John Swales who described the concept as “groups that have goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve these goals” (Borg 398). The concept is closely related to the notion of a speech community and interpretive community, and while it was initially focused on written communication the concept soon united to apply to spoken and written communication (Borg 399). While Swales outlined several distinct criteria that define a discourse community, namely shared goals and purposes expressed by communication and typically voluntary action, several features have not been clearly defined (Borg 388). Such as the relative size of a discourse community, whether speech is a necessity, the community’s stability, and its genre (Borg 399). Regardless of these issues, a discourse community is a concept that may be applied to illustrate how communication through language unites people and forms a group, in which members are engaged by a common goal or purpose and form a collective identity.

Another theoretical approach to language and identity is the linguistic relativity hypothesis also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, developed by linguist Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (Hussein 642). The concept’s premise is that language has a strong impact on our perception and the world around us (Hussein 642). Sapir defined it by stating “the language we speak and think in shapes the way we perceive the world” and “the existence of the various language systems implies that the people who think in these different languages must perceive the world differently” (Hussein 642). Whorf further complicated the hypothesis by introducing cultural aspects, for example, he claims “if speakers of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers of another language lack similar words, then speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things” (Hussein 643). In this passage, Whorf is suggesting that language not only shapes worldview and perception, but also potentially limits two groups from interacting with one another.

Both theories emphasize the existing relationship between language and identity, and consider language as the initial force for forming collective identities, perceptions and worldviews. This direction is important to consider when discussing issues faced as a result of identity, and realizing their origins lay in language. In other words, both theories argue language shapes identity, which may result in further effects and consequences and not vice-versa.

Furthermore, much of the recent research related to language and identity is focused on “the ways identity is constructed in all acts of personal and public communication,” as illustrated by the four papers that appeared at the annual language and identity symposium, and later were presented at the Department of Linguistics Friday seminars held at the University of Sydney in 2012 (Don 2). Which further supports the view that language shapes identity and not vice-versa, as previously stated.

2.0 Historical russification

In order to understand sociolinguistic occurrences in the post-Soviet space and the notion of language and identity in Ukraine, it is necessary to recognize the historical context. Sociolinguist Aneta Pavlenko is one of the leading scholars focusing on post-Soviet states and issues related to language, including the effects of multilingualism on identity (Pavlenko 269). Historically, in effort to integrate cultures and

societies, the Soviet Union engaged in the process of russification, as Pavlenko states “sociolinguists commonly use ‘russification’ as a trope referring to consistent and long-lasting attempts to forcibly make Russians out of non-Russians” (264). In other words, the Soviet government “enforced Russian language policies on the populations of successor states” in attempt to integrate them and create a unified Soviet Russian lingual society (264). In “Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Successor States,” Pavlenko claims that post-Soviet states share common political and linguistic systems as result of shared history and russification. She believes that following each state's independence they are now going through four similar interrelated processes as a result of an “intended language shift” (264-67). For example, she writes, “For decades and, in some cases, centuries, the inhabitants of what we now call post-Soviet countries or successor states had watched their native languages take second seat to Russian, the lingua franca of the Russian empire and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The dissolution of the USSR in December of 1991 allowed the successor states to distance themselves from Russia and to renegotiate this bilingual compromise. In contrast to many postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the new governments did not want to preserve Russian as one of official languages – rather, they wanted to create new linguistic regimes, where Russian would play only a supporting role or no role at all” (262). In this passage, Pavlenko is suggesting that the linguistic transformation occurred artificially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as states would re-install their own languages. Pavlenko, then, believes that this occurrence could be useful for researchers to consider as a sort of sociolinguistic ‘experiment,’ in which the effects of language reforms are displayed on societies of similar backgrounds (262). She argues that the fourteen post-Soviet successor states are exposed to four interrelated processes, as she explains:

- a) russification, i.e. the effects of Russian and Soviet language policies on the populations of successor states;
- (b) nativization, i.e. the effects of the intended language shift on the public domain;
- (c) assimilation, i.e. the effects of post-Soviet language reforms on allegiances and competencies of linguistic minorities; and
- (d) commodification, i.e. the effects of Russia’s economic recovery on the status of Russian in the post-Soviet space (Pavlenko 264).

It is important to note, that these four processes are not necessarily limited to the post-Soviet space, and are largely discussed by other scholars who consider the effects of language change and bilingualism. Furthermore, Pavlenko believes that each individual state is at different stages in these processes and undergoes them at varying periods of time.

Correspondingly, in “Language and Identity in the Late Soviet Union and Thereafter,” Anastassia Zabrodskaia and Martin Ehala expand Aneta Pavlenko’s argument that post-Soviet states encountered similar sociolinguistic change by claiming that these changes impacted collective identities and social behavior (164-65). However, to illustrate this notion with respect to historical events and the concept of collective identity they abstain from referring to Pavlenko’s aforementioned processes and “other terms of the nature of ‘X-ification’, in favor of the notion of normalization” (165). In their discussion they consider specific case studies collected from post-Soviet states and evaluate normalization efforts. The authors define normalization as “all language planning attempts that aim to establish a desired language regime that would be perceived by the population as normal”, a term which they derive from its first use in Catalonia as part of “the General Plan of Language Normalization” in 1991 (165). They outline two qualitative features necessary for language normalization, firstly, widespread language competency, and secondly, widespread “emotional attachment to the collective identity associated with the official language” (165). I believe their notion of collective identity relates to previously discussed sociolinguistic theories, such as discourse communities and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. The authors argue that the Soviet Union fostered a lack of distinct identities with regards to language and as a result current successor states lack collective identity. For example, they write, “the distinctions between ethnic, linguistic and national identities became blurred as a result of Soviet language and ethnic policies” (166). Zabrodskaia and Ehala, then, believe that there are a number of factors including language proficiency and the sociolinguistic environment that determine the ethno-linguistic identity of Russian speakers in post-Soviet states (167). Possible issues faced with a lack of collective identity are

translated by a lack of national identity, as the author's illustrate in their concluding remarks "by the spring 2014 events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation" (169).

However, in "Italian, Ukrainian or Russian? Language and Identity in Crimea," Paola Bocale provides an effective counter-argument to the annexation of Crimea as a result of lacking collective identity and language. She argues that minority ethnic Italians in Crimea have been able to preserve their ethnic identity despite losing their ethnic language. For example, she writes, "one of the main assumptions in the study of linguistic identity is that language and identity are intimately linked and interrelated. This is because language plays a central role in both interpreting and proclaiming identity" (621). In this passage, Bocale is suggesting that language is considered as a determinant for identity, as previously discussed and illustrated by the notion of discourse communities and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Bocale, however, believes that the Crimean Italian minority could be a potential exception to this relationship and further notes the existing discrepancy between ethnic identification and language in Ukraine. Her argument that minorities still manage to preserve their identity in multilingual contexts strikes me as a highly nuanced occurrence that simply demonstrates how minorities are a possible exception to the well-established relationship between language and identity. For example, in her conclusion Bocale states that her findings "are in line with results from other studies of minorities, which have reported positive attitudes towards all of the different languages available in multilingual contexts" (632). Furthermore, I find her collected fieldwork data questionable as to its support of this relationship as she relies on a self-assessment of language competence and attitudes by means of a survey (Bocale 626). This approach raises possible issues of bias and accuracy, but even considering the collected data, "more than half of the respondents (62.7%) indicated that they had either no knowledge of Italian at all (18.8%) or a very poor knowledge mostly consisting of the names of some traditional dishes and a few greetings (43.9%)" (Bocale 626). I further question her avoidance to address the events in Crimea, that arguably disprove her study, as she does by stating "an analysis and discussion of the complex, volatile situation which has developed in Crimea since March 2014 is beyond the scope of this work" in her conclusion (Bocale 632).

In support of the relationship between language and identity in Ukraine, Iryna Zbyr in "Contemporary Language Issues in Ukraine: Bilingualism or Russification," claims that the historical russification and as a result prevalent Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in Ukraine translates to issues of national identity and solidarity. To illustrate this point, she analyzes instances of the widely spread hybrid form of Ukrainian-Russian dialect known as Surzhyk, linguistic perspectives on this dialect, Ukrainian nationalism as a response, and historical events leading to these language issues in Ukraine. For example, she writes, "the language issue in Ukraine is nowadays an important component of a complex problem of national identity, since many people view the language as a foundation for this identity. That is why the given problem seems to be absolutely indispensable when the Ukrainians defend their own identity" (1). Zbyr suggests that there is an existing complex issue of national identity in which language plays a key role, and that Ukrainians face issues with language as they are establishing their own identity. Zbyr, then, believes that not only does the presence of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism imply national identity issues but also potential sociopolitical conflicts. Her argument precisely relates to the recent geopolitical changes in Ukraine and the conflict with Russia. However, her assertion that "high national self conscious and a high level of resistance to political, cultural and language expansion of neighboring countries is a key to preserving Ukrainian identity" strikes me as a simplistic view of addressing this issue, as she doesn't specify nor discuss possible methods for supporting this resistance (8). Her study however, is an illuminating piece in support of my argument that the relationship understanding the relationship between language and identity may illustrate the significance of language through effects on political and social change, as Zbyr presents in the case of Ukraine.

3.0 Religious influence

Likewise, Catherine Wanner elaborates on the lack of national identity as a result of language issues in the context of Ukraine, and complicates this relationship by introducing religion. In "'Fraternal' Nations

and Challenges to Sovereignty in Ukraine: The Politics of Linguistic and Religious Ties,” she argues that “non-accommodating bilingualism” and “ambient faith” characterize the social situation in Ukraine and support the political and military conflict with Russia and related current events. Wanner defines “non-accommodating bilingualism” as the issues posed by the Russian-Ukrainian language fluidity in Ukraine for “sociologists and demographers who rely on fixed, unambiguous categories to conduct survey research” (432). Her reference to “ambient faith” is outlined by the prominent presence of Orthodoxy in both Ukraine and Russia, and religious existence alongside secularism without directly challenging it (433). She writes, “in sum, this crisis risks destroying the fluid acceptance of linguistic preferences and the high levels of bilingualism that have been achieved so far. The versatility of language choice makes it difficult to identify a Russian compatriot in terms of language” (432). Wanner demonstrates that current events may lead to greater political division and reinforcement of language barriers to satisfy the need for greater political identification, which as a result may change the extensive “non-accommodating bilingual” nature of Ukrainian society. Wanner, then, believes that currently the versatility of language with regards to political identification leaves the state vulnerable to calls for protecting human-rights and other threats to Ukraine’s national integrity and sovereignty. This further exemplifies how the lack of national identity as a result of language issues, in this case Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism opens the possibility for political and social change, or manipulation (with regards to Russia).

4.0 Socioeconomic factors

While not directly related to issues of language, the primary focus of this paper, the article “Why Ukraine Is Not Russia Hegemonic National Identity and Democracy in Russia and Ukraine,” challenges the argument that language shapes identity by illustrating how other socioeconomic and political factors are more powerful in forming and sustaining a collective identity in Ukraine. Author’s Yitzhak Brudny and Evgeny Finkel argue that while Ukraine and Russia stem from similar Soviet backgrounds, their post-Soviet sociopolitical developments vary, such that Ukraine has developed a greater democratic and liberal society as a result of failure to establish a hegemonic national identity, while Russia developed a stronger hegemonic national identity which supported authoritarianism. For example, the authors write:

Collective identity is a catchy and popular concept, invoked by scholars to describe a wide range of phenomena from the fate of empires, regional autonomy movements, social movements to international relations and foreign policy. However, could it be useful, as a variable, in explaining such crucial contemporary political process as democratization? We argue it can and will try to demonstrate the impact of national identity in explaining Russian and Ukrainian diverging post-communist paths (813).

In this passage, Brudny and Finkel are suggesting that the notion of identity is an important variable for sociopolitical outcomes, which distinguishes Ukraine from Russia as a result. The author’s, then, believe that although Ukraine has many issues with establishing a unitary national identity, it is precisely this instance that develops a democratic collective identity which is not formed in Russia.

By the same token, in support of the notion that economic incentives motivate language and identity transformations, the process of commodification should be discussed as a potential trade-off between language and identity. This notion was previously mentioned as one of Aneta Pavlenko’s four processes with regards to the “language valorization” of Russian in post-Soviet contexts (268). And introduced in Paole Bocale’s work as “language as capital” in the case of Crimean ethnic Italians viewing Italian language “as capital that could be mobilised to access resources and jobs” (628).

Similarly, in “Globalization, the New Economy, and the Commodification of Language and Identity,” Monica Heller adds globalization to the discussion and draws examples of how language is viewed as a valuable resource by French speakers in Canada. She maintains that as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and globalized, language and identity are commodified in response to increasing

economic incentives. For example, she states “the globalized new economy is bound up with transformations of language and identity in many different ways. These include emerging tensions between State-based and corporate identities and language practices, between local, national and supra-national identities and language practices, and between hybridity and uniformity” (473). In this passage, Heller suggests that the commodification of language and identities creates tensions between members of society and organizational groups, and that the commodification of language may involve identity or occur independently. Heller, then, notes that there is competition for language as a resource, this is particularly seen amongst minority Francophones who are natively bilingual and speakers who acquire language resources from schooling. She focuses her study on Francophone areas of Canada and analyzes interviews, recordings, and data collected by call-centers in federal and provincial agencies. Her argument that commodification of language does not necessarily involve a trade-off between language and identity strikes me as an interesting case of how Francophone Canadians managed to preserve their cultural identity while responding to economic incentives. I find her findings very closely related to Bocale’s study of ethnic Italians in Crimea, another example of how this occurrence is largely limited to minorities.

5.0 Education

Another way to evaluate the effects of language on identity is by considering implemented education policies. Such policies relate to Pavlenko’s process of nativization, as they aim to promote a language shift, in this case by means of education, and Zabrodskaja’s and Ehala’s all-encompassing term of normalization, which aims to promote language competency and a sense of attachment through collective identity.

An exemplifying case of the effects of such policies on identity is Irma Clots-Figueras and Paolo Masella’s study of Catalan identities in “Education, Language and Identity,” where they assert that the language of instruction at school influences identity. They determine that students taught in Catalan have stronger Catalan feelings, despite their family’s background and presence of a Catalan relationship. For example, the authors write:

Much has been said about the possibility that education can affect individual identity and preferences. However, to date, not many studies have been conducted on this matter. We have considered the 1983 educational reform, through which the Catalan education system became bilingual and Catalan as well as Spanish was taught in schools and we have found a positive and large effect of this policy on Catalan identity (353).

Clots-Figueras and Masella suggest that their study has shown that education does influence identity, in this case through language of instruction. They, then, believe that policies that govern educational systems in Catalonia, Spain, and elsewhere should carefully consider the effects on empowerment and cultural identity.

Similarly, Adriana Lleras-Muney and Allison Shertzer discuss the impacts of English as the required language of instruction in schools during the Americanization period on immigrant children in “Did the Americanization Movement Succeed? An Evaluation of the Effect of English-Only and Compulsory Schooling Laws on Immigrants”. However, they reach an opposing conclusion that these efforts were only partially successful and possibly confounded. For example, they write:

It is clear that there were strong trends among immigrants towards integration, and their outcomes were converging towards those of natives relatively fast. It is possible the Americanization movement contributed to voluntary integration, but we find no evidence that the laws regulating English in schools contributed significantly to that process (Lleras-Muney and Shertzer 286).

While these two studies reach contradictory conclusions, they still support the notion that identities are impacted by language, in this case driven by educational policies. Legislators and government officials

arguably realize this relationship and apply similar policies in effort to achieve certain cultural or demographic outcomes, such as English-speaking or Catalan-speaking majorities.

6.0 Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have illustrated many complications to the relationship between language and identity by presenting relevant theories, cases, and research. I aimed to apply these pieces to the Ukrainian and post-Soviet context and further illustrate the significance of language through recent events in the region.

However, as David Block presents in “Issues in Language and Identity Research in Applied Linguistics,” there are many potential issues that arise when addressing identity as part of applied linguistics research. For example, he writes, “most work on language and identity inspired in poststructuralism adopts a social constructivist perspective according to which identity is about the multiple ways in which people position themselves and are positioned, that is, the different subjectivities and subject positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them, within particular social, historical and cultural contexts” (18). Block suggests that language and identity are viewed by most researchers following a poststructuralist approach as an individualistic or collectivistic phenomenon which is determined by context. He believes that the way identity is therefore understood and considered may be limited and suggests considering a more nuanced approach by looking closer at demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, national identity and so forth. His study reveals the importance of considering nuances in social studies research and while I believe I have presented research that is worthy of study, perhaps it could be further scrutinized to determine potential drawbacks and bias. Block’s argument that a psychological angle for language and identity research could be useful in addition to the predominant social focus leads me to envision an extended study of Ukrainian language and identity specifics with a greater psychological focus oriented on individual thought patterns and processes.

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