LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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Summary

Identity studies revolve around the belonging or non-belonging of an individual or individuals to a community. A community can be minimally small or maximally large, and each has its own identity – that which is perceived by itself and by others, formed by the various relationships and history (and all which that comprises) of the community and its members. Linguistic identity is the result of an intersection between language and the individual and/or community. It is determined by a binary opposition between the perceived and the perceiver, defined by the sum of the relevant constituent elements of identity – which, in turn, are defined by the totality of the speakers' experiences.

1. Introduction

There is no question that language is not only crucial, but probably also the single most critical factor in the construction of one's identity. This is especially clear in such socio-, ethno- and politico-linguistic situations as are found across the whole of the Europe of today. The European Union is one that is expanding to include ever more members, jumping in recent years from 12 to 15 to 25 to 27 (and probably more in the near future, with three candidate countries at the time of this writing), and a Union that is also attempting to become a reocgnizable single political entity with its own greater identity – that is, an identity that is greater than that of its individual parts – as well as power vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Meanwhile, however, such social and political developments can have tangible effects on the constituent members of the EU – especially, one might argue, on citizens of those original founding members: they find that many of them more often than not yearn to retain their own national identities and even emphasize and promote their identities in ways that might not have been considered socially or politically acceptable in recent decades. This is especially true in the face of, and triggered by, the (sometimes feared) influx of 'new Europeans' into 'old Europe' and a perceived submergence of 'old Europe' into a faceless mass of dozens of ethnicities. 'Od Europe' would become a European melting pot without the physical space needed for large assimilations, such as was available in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In terms of language *per se*, the language question in Europe expands as does the very Union itself: while all languages (at least those languages that are 'official' in each constituent member state!) are valued by the central administration of the Union, only a few can logistically be 'official' languages of the EU.

Of course the elements that make up 'identity' are many indeed, beyond the purely (if one might use such a word) 'ethnic'. Perhaps somewhat implausibly, until recently at least, even economic considerations can become part of the 'identity' equation. Thus, there may be one Euro currency that supporters would like to spread to the whole of the Union, but there are still many other currencies in use. We see that a member state such as Sweden votes to retain the *krona*, Britain is strongly tied to the pound, and the mass of new members might never decide to adopt the Euro. A neighboring and ethnically related sister state of Sweden – Norway – doesn't even join the Union, valuing its identity and individuality to the extent that they have been able to withstand internal and external pressures to conform... at least politically and economically. Although there exist many European currencies beyond the Euro, there are also many 'Euro' languages (many more than there are currencies), and there always will be. Certainly there cannot be any notion of *one European language* in the way that the Soviet Union had at one time envisioned the development of one 'Soviet' language – Russian plus a variety of ethnic terms paying lip service to indigenous non-Russian cultures. In the course of this article, several key linguistic situations will be presented and taken as emblematic of the question 'language and identity', both within and outside of the EU. It will rapidly become clear that this notion of identity is not only complex, but that it also changes from culture/micro-culture to culture/micro-culture (where 'micro-culture' can be seen as non-national, regional, or otherwise less than mainstream). Crucially, it is also a phenomenon that affects the individual as much as it does the community. Therefore we need to begin by trying to express what one might mean by the very notion of 'identity'

in general.

2. Identity in General

What contributes to the construction of one's *identity in general*? Apart from language, we must take into consideration a wide range of factors – in other words, extralinguistic ones. Such factors can include – and here it must be said that the list can never be exhaustive – the following:

2.1. Family

To what extent does one's upbringing contribute to one's identity? How does the 'identity' of one's parents – one or both – shape that of the offspring? Where did *their* identity come from? Their original home or homes, their own parentage, life experiences? Family can be an enormous source of feeling in the entire equation, where 'feelings of identity' can naturally be negative as well as positive.

2.2. Sociology

An individual might, at some point – or at many points – in his or her life ask such questions as "who am I in society? what is my position in that society? how am I regarded by the society and its members?". This is clearly an intersection of the 'individual' and 'community', both of which are outlined in the larger sections to follow below; however, as a community is made up of individuals, it is not out of place to consider the question here as well. 'Sociology' implies the study of society, i.e., of the community. And this 'community' can be as small (a social group) or as large as the circumstances dictate them to be. Does 'class' come into the discussion? And if so, is the question of 'class' associated with ethnicity and society? To what extent does schooling come into it?

2.3. Psychology

The field of psychology can contribute to an understanding of identity on a variety of levels. Thus, our individual can also ask himself or herself: "what kind of a person am I? how do I relate to persons X and Y? and does the reaction of these other persons contribute to my identity?". Here we are dealing with the question of 'self' vs. 'other': as in any system of relationships and identities, one individual's position is usually defined vis-à-vis that of another. This is true of any system that is made up of binary relationships (e.g., phonology, semantics, et al.). The community is open to the same sets of defnitional oppositions, but on a grander scale: in all of the narrative above, one could replace 'person' or 'individual' with 'community'.

2.4. History/politics

This subject is difficult to encapsulate, as it is inherently extremely complex – it must take into account long as well as recent histories of peoples, political/military convulsions, 'normal' societal evolution, and the like. But, for starters, one might ask some of the following questions (and, again, the list cannot but be incomplete): Is the

individual in question part of a nation that has a glorious history? For whom is it glorious? Perhaps a difficult history? Does the community feel a sense of belonging or of alienation because of it? Was this history one of persecution on the part of another ethnic or political group? Does the individual or set of individuals have political rights to express their identity – in whatever form this might be described? Is that nation strong today? Or was it once strong but now weak, possibly oppressed by another, or by another ethnic entity within the political boundaries of the present day? Whether for the individual or the community, such questions essentially involve an influence from the *outside*, from outside of one's own person or group (however small or large). Therefore, being at the mercy of outside influences, one can argue that the individual and community can to some extent be in a position of weakness – which will naturally affect one's notion of identity. All of this would of course be negated were they part of a political entity which had the *upper* hand in such situations: again, affecting one's feeling of identity, but this time in the opposite direction.

2.5. Nationalism

This subject, once again, is one of great complexity, and is intricately tied to the previous set of topics – necessarily being a product of history and politics; as such, it might – emphasizing 'might' – be considered a sub-category of 'history/politics'. Is the individual proud to be from his or her country? Why? Is the nation or community being or has it been threatened? Oppressed? Or has it been an oppressor? Does the individual belong to a minority group, and is he or she proud of that group? Is that group considered a 'community'? Does the individual feel less than proud... or even ashamed? Does that individual feel superior or inferior to people from other countries or ethnic groups? And the community as a whole? Obviously this posing of questions could go on *ad infinitum*.

The factors so briefly just outlined come into play for both individuals and communities, intersecting and affecting each other in a mathematically challenging way. Clearly they can *all* be described as 'complex', constituent parts of a massively complicated and sensitive process the ultimate outcome of which is that which we call 'identity'. In the following treatment of *language* and identity, some factors will be more important, others less important, depending on the situation in question. In the end, it is a problem of the sum total of all of these factors taken together, a set of factors that must be recognized at the outset as fluid and changing. We begin our consideration of language and identity with the cornerstone of the community, the individual.

3. Language and Identity I: the Individual

It is the individual who is most concerned with identity: the individual is directly affected by socio-cultural conditions – all of those listed above and more – and who feels an immediate connection with them, indeed, who either 'identifies' with them or not. And, of course, it is individuals who collectively make up a community, and who are therefore primary; there is no community without the individual. In this section, we focus on one-to-one interactions, on how one person might react to others, and they to him or her, based on their language, languages, linguistic variants, dialects, individual linguistic situations.

What is it that one thinks, what *perceptions* come into one's mind, just when one is heard speaking or hears others speaking a language that is not one's own (a 'foreign' language)? The feelings that are triggered may be classified as preconceptions, prejudiced – negative or positive – reactions, that can have as many sources as there are lifetime experiences. Some of these reactions, if not most, are entirely superficial and subjective: it does not take much reflection to realize how many times one hears someone say, for example: "I hate the French"; "I don't like the English"; "German/Germans sound harsh"; "I love Italian... it's so romantic... the language of love" (the same is said of French!); "Americans are so uneducated"; "I just *love* the British accent" (no matter that there are as many 'British' accents as there are regions and sub-regions) and the like. And of course "I hate the French" can easily lead to negative perceptions of someone who is merely heard speaking the language.

In a related but slightly more complicated situation, what are the reactions on the part of an individual when hearing a 'foreign' accent in spoken English? Such instances are related in that they involve linguistic 'otherness', and more removed in that there is the element of deduction: *which language* does the other speak natively (i.e., *where are they from?*) – the answer to this question may dictate the feelings which the individual will have towards his or her companion, and of course the individual may end up being wrong! Reactions in such circumstances are many, varied, and can be violent – violence and language are often interconnected, depending upon the level of xenophobia present in our individual. And, although there may be many background reasons for the thoughts which the individual may have (historical, political, cultural), it is most often the direct 'meeting point' between persons that calls forth his or her reactions: voice-to-voice or face-to-face interaction, spoken language, basic communication. In other words, language.

3.1. Case Studies: the Individual

A few examples of such situations might usefully be described here, situations that can be replicated across the globe, in country after country after country. The following examples are entirely drawn from experience, that of the author as well as of others known to him, and are meant only to exemplify the complexity of the issue at hand. They also illustrate the fact that, although they are complex, paradoxically such instances are so common in everyday life that they even escape notice as a matter of course. These situations are purposely portrayed as happening to a third person – which may also be the case – because they are not meant necessarily to be autobiographical, although some may be.

3.1.1. A British student attends a German high school in another country – for various family reasons – and learns French for a year at that school. After leaving school, she goes on a trip through Germany and into Alsace, Strasbourg. She and her boyfriend look for a room at a *pension* and she asks for a room in perfect French, extremely proud of herself for doing so. The person on the other side of the counter listens, looks, and answers in German. What she hadn't realized was that she had been taught French by a German speaker, and consequently had a German accent in her French. This was a moment of frustration, and an awakening of the realization that a) there was a layer of linguistic identity that she didn't realize she had and b) she was looked at differently

because of the perception of her on the part of her interlocutor.

3.1.2. An American travels to Great Britain, and ends up in a pub in greater London. After hours of conversation with others in the pub, one of his new companions eventually asks "so you're from Canada?"... whereupon the American, completely surprised by this, answers in the negative. As it turns out, he is from an American region without a clearly identifiable local accent: 'identifiable' to his interlocutor means either the US South, New York, Boston, possibly Chicago (although the first two will be most recognizable as 'strong' regional US American accents). Whereas an *American* might pick up an accent as being 'midwestern', others (non-Americans) might not. The differences in regional variants that non-Americans hear would have to be more distinct from what is considered 'mainstream' American – that is, an 'American' that is not identifiable as marked in some way or another. Further experiences of this kind revealed two factors: a) the interlocutor could not hazard a guess as to the identity of the linguistic variant of his/her companion; and b) past experience might have shown that an overt assumption that the tourist was from the United States would meet with a negative reaction should that person actually be from Canada. A US citizen is not offended if assumed to be from Canada, while the opposite can be true: a question of identity – political and otherwise. It is no accident that many Canadian tourists, especially touring students, have a Canadian flag appended to their backpacks. This little sign of identity immediately relieves interlocutors of the burden of having to guess the bearer's identity from his/her speech alone.

3.1.3. Another American, this time one who had spent a lot of time in the South of the United States, finds himself once again in a pub. Another British pub. If there is one thing that most men in a pub do not do, it is talk to other men in the men's room. The gent's. This American, by now used to being called a 'yank', is suddenly addressed by his 'neighbor' in the restroom. After a moment's shock, he realizes that he knows his 'neighbor's' accent. He asks "Where are you from?" "Atlanta." "Atlanta? I spent twenty years there!" There ensues a friendly conversation that continues out into the bar area, where the two of them have a lively talk for fifteen minutes. When the Atlantan leaves, our American turns to rejoin his friends. Their reaction: "What the hell was that?" His response is one of confusion; his friends, however, continue. "You sounded... different." He then realizes that, for those fifteen minutes, he had been speaking 'southern'. He had slipped back culturally, linguistically; his identity had shifted, if only for fifteen minutes. What he had experienced was linguistic accomodation: accomodating, shifting to the language of his interlocutor, a shift into a comfort zone for the latter. But, perhaps, there is more to it, as it is also a comfort zone for him: he shifted to an identity from which he had been separated for a very long time; obviously the sift implies a positive identity with that particular variety of language.

3.1.4. A British individual has an English father and a German mother. He learns standard German but has spent time in southern Germany; his mother is Bavarian by birth, and his variant of German has a southern tinge to it. This tinge is always present when he speaks German, which is pleasing to the ear of his mother. His mother, on the other hand, speaks perfect standard German, with a slight tinge of her own: but, when she is heard speaking German on the phone with northern Germans, this tinge becomes more pronounced. It is a question of identity: I am southern German, I am not one of

you. Again, as in so many human and human-related situations, there is a binary code: 'plus' something, 'minus' something. "I am plus Bavarian, you are minus Bavarian." A northern German in the same situation would simply replace 'Bavarian' with 'northern German', or even with 'proper German'. The term 'proper' is used here on purpose, because one's sense of identity, given historical and political realities, often is dicated by who is in power, where they are from, and, therefore, which variant of a language is 'proper'... and therefore, which variants are *not* proper, and less prestigious. Such situations have long-lasting effects on inter-varietal linguistic relations – leading sometimes to difficult inter-personal relations. The example of Britain is clearly similar, as there are clear understandings among speakers of 'standard' southern British English that their variey is the one to be emulated, to be taught in foreign and national schools. It is only after the passage of significant amounts of time that other variants can begin to attain some sense of status or vogue – and then often only through the medium of television and other media of popular culture. This is the situation in the United Kingdom today, as ever larger numbers of presenters on television speak extremely marked variants of (non-southern English) English: West Midlands, Yorkshire, Welsh, Newcastle, Glaswegian, Dundonian, etc.

3.1.5. For individuals of former Yugoslavia there exists an astounding array of situations in relation to one's feeling of belong, involving not only language but history, politics, ethnicity, religion, and regional differences within one particular 'language'. But language is emblematic of the problem.

On an individual basis, one could examine each and every home and village in the former Yugoslavia. But if one were to take just one example, one could imagine a scenario in which there is a table at a cafe somewhere in Croatia, where all individuals present are Croatian, attending a conference. They share a political, ethnic, religious, historical, and linguistic identity: they are Croatian. But then, in the course of conversation, it transpires that they are from different regions within the country (and one which is very strangely configured, in the shape of a horseshoe, as Bosnia is right in the middle separating northeast Croatia from southwest Croatia). The friends and colleagues begin to compare notes. "How do *you* say this? Or that?" The words might be the same, with one or two exceptions, but talk turns to such features as vowel length (short and long) and tone (falling or rising): the result is that some of the speakers still have all four distinctions, while others have only two. The one thing that binds them all together is that they are all speaking Croatian: when in the company of family, they speak according to the norms they had acquired as children – that is, the pattern of their parents. Now, when with other Croatians from different regions, there is a levelling-out, another accommodation: a reduction in the number of features (in this case, tone) in order to accommodate to the common denominator (i.e., for some, reducing the number of distinctions in their speech). In this case, the greatest common denominator is 'Croatian', the element that binds the individuals together. The common element can be lexical, it can be phonetic (in this case vowel length); it can be anything as long as it is 'non-Serbian', 'non-Bosnian': here it is a *combination* of factors of different linguistic components that is important. Which brings in the following, in which attention spreads beyond language alone.

In any consideration of a region as complex as former Yugoslavia one must naturally

also consider the position of the Serb and Serbia: the Serb formerly belonged to the largest part and driving force of the Yugoslav federation. Politically – until recently – Serbia was seen as a pariah in the Balkans, and Serbs and Serbia have had to come to terms with an adjustment to their greater identity. A Serb will see him/herself as a) a Serb, b) Orthodox (for the most part), c) former majority partner in Yugoslavia, d) and closely related to Croats and Bosnians, of whom (crucially) neither are co-religionists. Two of these four categories might be seen as negatives (c and d), something which could have an effect on the feeling of identity within an individual Serb, especially when he or she is abroad. Obviously this feeling would be exacerbated when travelling within Croatia or Bosnia, but it would also have been felt to some extent in western Europe in the aftermath of the Balkan wars, when identifying oneself to others (the latter is no longer a factor, however). And here, naturally, we see again a blurring of the lines: the feeling, position, and perception of the individual will be closely allied to those of the community, which for the individual has served as a source of pride and protection over the years (see 5.5 below, where former Yugoslavia is again addressed, this time in terms of the greater community).

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Biographical Sketch

Stefan M Pugh holds the PhD in Slavic languages from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and has taught at Duke University and the University of St Andrews, where he is still a member of the Department of Russian. His research interests are centered upon historical linguistics (especially Slavic), contact linguistics (Slavic–Finno-Ugric, Ukrainian-Polish), synchronic linguistic description (Russian, Ukrainian, Rusyn). Published work includes *Testament to Ruthenian: A Linguistic Analysis of the Smotryc'kyj Variant* (1996), *Systems in Contact, System in Motion: the Assimilation of Russian Verbal Lexicon in the Baltic Finnic Languages of Russia* (1999), *Ukrainian: A Comprehensive Grammar* (with J Ian Press, 1999), *A New Historical Grammar of the East Slavic Languages, Vol. 1: Introduction and Phonology*, and numerous articles on related subjects.