



Language and Identity from the Perspective of a NNES ESL Immigrant Teacher

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Abstract

In the past two decades, the number of highly skilled immigrants has increased dramatically (Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006), contributing to Canada's success in attracting smart, well-educated professionals – English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers included. As such, many diverse languages and minorities co-exist within Canada, a welcoming home to thousands of immigrants and refugees from across the globe. Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's greeting speech to the first group of Syrian refugees, "We get to show the world how to open our hearts and welcome in people who are fleeing extraordinarily difficult situations ... You are home. Welcome home" (Trudeau, 2015) is a case in point.

Research has shown that the constant need to ask those who do not fit the perception of *Canadian* where they are from is not necessarily a matter of accepting someone's background and identity; it is more about how people react to learning about an immigrant's country of origin, as if that defines who they are (e.g., Amin, 2001; Cervatiuc, 2009; Fridland, 2015; Greene, 2011; James, & Shadd, 2001; Janusch, 2015; Kelly, 2013; Khayatt, 2001; Ilieva, 2012; Munro, 2003; Parmegiani, 2008; Selasi, 2014; Thiessen, Bascia, & Goodson, 1996).

The purpose of this research was to analyze: (a) the implications of standard English and world

Englishes and (b) the interplay between language and identity from a non-native English speaking (NNES) immigrant's perspective; concepts that were explored against relevant studies from the extant literature (e.g., Canagarajah, 2006; Chen, 2012; Cook, 1999; Deutscher, 2010; Gross, 2013; Kachru, 1985, 1990, 1996; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2000, 2010, 2012; Medgyes, 1983, 1992, 1994, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Ochs, 1993; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011; Phillipson, 1992; Rampton, 1990; Ricento, 2005, 2015; Widdowson, 1994).

Background

Standard English

To understand the factors that differentiate between first language (L1) and second language (L2) users, that is, native English speakers (NESS) and (NNESs), we need to consider the concept of standard English. Widdowson (1994) defines it as "the quality of clear communication and standards of intelligibility" (p. 379) and compares it with beverages such as cola and champagne, stating that "there are all kinds of cola, but only one is the real thing. Similarly, there is real English" (p. 378). Because "real" English is referred to as a benchmark of intelligibility, does it mean that the non-standard versions of the Queen's English are unintelligible? (Brass, 2016). Fridland (2015), on the other hand, explains that, "From a purely

linguistic standpoint, there is nothing about a standard language that is actually superior; yet, its socially preferred position is constantly seen as a statement about its linguistic superiority" (p. 88). These views echo Canagarajah (2006), who posits that standard English limits "the linguistic acquisition, creativity, and production" (p. 592) among L2 speakers, hence it is outside the classroom where students learn English for communication, negotiation, and real-world needs. Other researchers argue that standard English is both a tool and a weapon against L2 users:

Those minority-group members who learn the standard ... are seen as successfully integrated... But those who don't master the standard - because ... they come from a different language background (recent immigrants and their kids) - have a hard road already. And racism against them is too easily hidden behind, and justified by, the criticism that "they just don't know how to speak correctly." (Greene, 2011, p. 52)

World Englishes

Defined as emerging localized or indigenized varieties, world Englishes "are the result of diverse sociocultural contexts and diverse uses of the language in culturally distinct international contexts" (Kachru, 1990, p. 13). Utilizing the three circles paradigm, Kachru (1985) explains

the differences between standard English and its vernaculars: inner (i.e., L1 varieties), outer (i.e., ESL varieties), and expanding (i.e., English as a Foreign Language (EFL) varieties). The inner circle includes the native-speaker varieties of English spoken in countries such as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The outer circle is made up of countries that were colonized by NESs, hence English was introduced for administrative purposes (e.g., India, Jamaica, the Philippines, Singapore, Pakistan, etc.). The expanding circle refers to English being used as a foreign language in countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Russia, Brazil, etc. According to Ricento (2005), world Englishes stem from “a process of transformation rather than one of replacement, in which the ultimate outcome represents an identity that is not exclusively anchored in one culture/language or another” (p. 904).

The distinction between L1, ESL, and EFL varieties has brought about a lot of social change and controversy. From a sociopolitical and linguistic standpoint, English belongs to those who use it and not just to NNESSs in the inner circle (Brown, 1995; Canagarajah, 2006; Kachru, 1985). However, not all speakers from the outer and expanding circles think this way, as illustrated by Baxter (1980), who asked a group of Japanese teachers of English, “Are you a speaker of English?” and “Do you speak English?” Almost all of them answered negatively to the first and positively to the second question. Although they used English on a daily basis, the teachers interviewed did not perceive themselves as owners of their L2, which ties into Parmegiani’s (2008) observation that “no matter how well a person

might come to master an additional language, he or she will still be placed in an inferior position with respect to a native speaker” (p. 110).

Language and Identity

Is the speaker’s identity defined by their own perception of themselves or is it how the other speakers see them? Josselson (1983) notes that “identity is the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands in the world” (p. 10). Norton (2012), too, answers the question by linking the language learner with the outer world: “Language ... is a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated” (p. 1). Kramsch (2009) is of the opinion that no matter how hard we try, we are always influenced by new experiences and people: “An individual is formed not only through interpersonal relationships with others, but also through intrapersonal changes” (p. 212). While keeping an open eye to the way power within communities promotes or constrains the process of language learning, L2 use can be said to go beyond language acquisition; it pertains to “socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 163). The language-identity

domino effect is succinctly captured by Laozi: “Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habit. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny” (c. 529 BC). Consequently, language is paramount in the interplay between one’s individual awareness and social identity (see Figure 1).

Deutscher (2010) and Gross (2013) concur that our L1 shapes the way we think because it obliges us to specify certain information, which differs from language to language. For instance, a simple sentence like “This is my uncle” requires a Chinese speaker to present more information about said uncle, which side the uncle is on, whether he is related by marriage or birth, and how old he is. Comparing future languages (e.g., English), which have different verb forms to express the past, present, and future, with futureless languages (e.g., Chinese), which use the present simple to describe the events of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Chen (2012) believes that different languages generate different behaviours and attitudes, asserting that speakers of futureless languages tend to save more money: “When we speak about the future as more

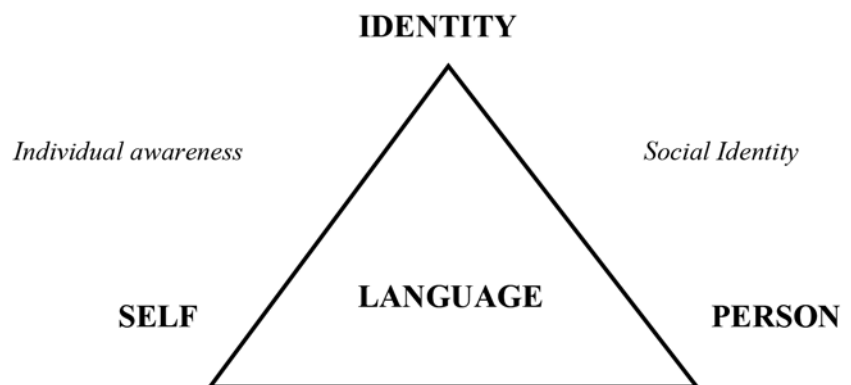


Figure 1: Triangle illustrating the interplay between the concepts of identity, person, and self, with language at its core, inspired from Riley (2009).

distinct from the present, it feels more distant and we're less motivated to save money now in favour of monetary comfort years down the line" (Chen, 2012).

Methodology

Research Design

Grounded theory, a "comprehensive, integrated, and highly structured, yet eminently flexible" (Glasser, 2004, p. 4) methodology, was used to explore the relationship between language and identity, with emphasis on how these concepts contribute to formulating a NNES's individual awareness and social identity. Because grounded theory is not concerned with factual descriptions or people but with concepts that are organized and integrated into hypotheses, its aim is "not to generalize findings to a broader population per se ... but to build a theoretical explanation by specifying phenomena" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 421). As a result, the research design can be modified as the researcher collects new data "from whatever source – literature, new data, collegial comments... [Its] goal is conceptual theory abstract of time, place, and people" (Glasser, 2004, p. 10-11).

In grounded theory, the researcher is the author "of a reconstruction of experience or meaning" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 26) who analyzes data by constant comparison and stays "sensitive to the data by being able to record events" (Mills et al., 2006, p. 28), which allows for recurring themes to be discovered, filtered, and observed. Grounded theory "works with any data – 'all is data' – not just one specific data" (Glasser, 2004, p. 12), hence the researcher decides what data will be utilized, analyzed,

and coded. Making constant comparisons between data collected enabled the researcher to: (a) guard against bias by challenging already formed thoughts against the new data and (b) achieve greater precision and consistency by clustering together similar phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Participants

Both NES and NNES EFL and ESL teachers (e.g., friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and graduate students) residing in Canada (e.g., Vancouver and Toronto) and Europe (e.g., Romania and Spain) were contacted via email, social media (e.g., Skype, Facebook, ESL Facebook groups, TESL Ontario online platform, and University of Calgary D2L), text message, and through the grapevine. All potential participants were briefly introduced to the research topic, what their participation would entail, and were encouraged to ask further questions. Initially, two individuals responded positively: one former ESL teacher from a private school based in Toronto and one student researcher enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Calgary, Alberta. Time restrictions and family responsibilities were the reasons invoked by the teachers who were not able to take part in the study. Later, however, the participant based in Toronto withdrew from the study, noting her hectic personal and professional schedule, whereas the graduate student did not meet the participant requirement criteria. Four weeks into the thirteen-week graduate course program during which this study was completed, the research design had to be reconsidered from research *with* to research *without* participants. Creswell (2014) calls this an *emergent design*: "The initial plan for research

cannot be tightly prescribed, and some or all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher ... begins to collect data" (p. 235).

Data Collection and Analysis

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis are interrelated. The data collection strategy drew on primary research studies including: (1) computerized bibliographic database; (2) relevant books and journals; (3) review articles; (4) references in books and articles; (5) research journal reflections; and (6) the World Wide Web. The data analysis followed Corbin and Strauss's (1990) *conditional matrix*: It started from broader conditions (e.g., economic conditions, cultural values, political trends, social movements) and moved inward to more specific conditions (e.g., NNES ESL immigrant teachers).

Of the 56 sources revealed by the initial literature search, 12 studies were dedicated to language, 20 dealt with language and identity, 20 were on NNEs and/or ESL teachers, and four on immigrants and immigrant teachers. The articles that focused on NNES L2 learners rather than teachers were excluded, hence the number of relevant articles was narrowed down, which materialized as a shift in focus from second language acquisition (SLA) to language and identity and NNES and ESL teachers. The data generated by independent literature review, public document analysis, and research journal reflections were triangulated. Through open coding, the data was analyzed and interpreted by comparing it against other data for similarities and differences. The hypotheses were constantly revised during research until they became evidence in repeated observations and documents. (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Results

A language cannot be frozen; it is a living thing that changes as its speakers change, which is a *sine qua non* of a language in use as opposed to a dying language (Brass, 2016). The inflexibility of Latin, for instance, led to its losing ground and eventually dying out. English – be it standard or not – is simple and flexible because of the large number of worldwide L1 and L2 users who change the rules and adapt it to fit their needs: “Shedding unnecessary bits of grammatical baggage may be necessary for language to spread in the very long run. Success has its price” (Greene, 2011, p. 130).

Since language is learnt from a very young age, it becomes habit, which in time influences our perceptions, feelings, and experiences: “With such an early and intense drilling, the habit soon becomes second nature, effortless and unconscious” (Deutscher, 2010). If language is indeed learned as habit and as the old adage goes, “Old habits die hard,” then changing one’s frame of mind may not happen overnight; as a matter of fact, it may never happen: “To change your language, you must change your life” (Walcott, 2011).

Based on differences in grammar and lexis between various languages, some scholars argue that providing details in a language and leaving them out in another speaks to differences in the way L1 and L2 users think (Chen, 2012; Deutscher, 2010; Gross, 2013). The English word “neighbour” makes no reference to gender, whereas its French counterpart has different forms for masculine, “voisin,” and feminine, “voisine.” Further, the same object has a feminine grammatical gender in German (e.g., “die Brücke,” bridge) and a masculine grammatical gender in Spanish (e.g., “el puente,” bridge),

which may explain why an English, a German, and a French speaker will relate differently to the same animate and inanimate objects, which supports language theorists’ argument that L1 influences the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Because L2 speakers bring their L1 habits into their target language use, NNESSs can never be as proficient as their NES counterparts. Widdowson (1994) attributes this phenomenon to the inexorable difference between L2 and L1 speakers, which lies in the target language unfamiliarity and foreignness, something that L1 speakers cannot possibly experience.

L2 plays an essential role in NNESSs’ identity formation of new Canadians who try to appropriate their L2 to function successfully in their new country. Identity formation takes place throughout their life, a complex and complicated process that involves a *moratorium phase* when “we ... are imagining or experimenting with alternative selves [and] learn who we are by discovering our differences from others” (Josselson, 1983, p. 11-13). The fact that “identity becomes a way of judging ourselves with respect to a typology or set of values that is meaningful to others with whom we identify ourselves” (p. 11) speaks to the interplay between language and identity.

“The most obvious indication that someone is a second-language (L2) user is a tendency to produce speech with a ‘foreign accent’” (Munro, 2003, p. 38). *Foreign* is defined in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) as “not from your own country” (p. 550). Indeed, there are immigrants who speak English with an accent that is perceived as being different from the Canadian accent, a stereotype that labels them as NNESSs: “Our language attitudes reflect our feelings about

the speakers of a language rather than the language itself” (Fridland, 2015, p. 88). Research has shown that the answer to “Where are you from?” – the most frequently asked question across Canada – has deeper socio-political connotations, which ties into Kachru’s (1985) paradigm of English circles (i.e., inner, outer, and expanding) and speaks to a power game that heavily relies on the respondent’s country of origin (e.g., Khayatt, 2001 Selasi, 2014).

When foreign-trained immigrants are granted entry to Canada, their education, work experience, language proficiency, age, funds, and adaptability are assessed by a points system under the Federal Skilled Worker program (Government of Canada, 2017). Unless they meet all these mandatory criteria, they are not given the green light. Assuming that NNESSs are inferior to NESs because they do not subscribe to the local standards of English borders *linguicism* (i.e., discrimination based on accent) or *smiling racism* (James & Shadd, 2001), which singles out those who do not fit the perception of Canadian: “It is not only a recognition of difference, but also the explicit emphasis on difference to mediate hierarchy based on colour, ethnicity, language, and race” (Khayatt, 2001, p. 81).

Discussion

Language and identity are omnipresent in linguistics, literature, philosophy, music, art, etc.; all equally intriguing and fascinating. The extant literature referenced in this paper speaks to the importance of the issue at hand. Having a different L1 has its own advantages and disadvantages; however, not being a NES should not be perceived as a handicap rather as a difference that can benefit the community at large. Medgyes (1992) states that “what is weakness on one

side of the coin, is an asset on the other” (p. 346). By showing differences and similarities between NESs and NNESs and the way they process, understand, and speak their L1 and L2, this paper capitalizes on diversity seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

Given that Canada is a country made up mostly of immigrants, “Canada’s population grew by 1.7 million people since the last census in 2011. Immigrants accounted for two-thirds of the increase” (Campion-Smith, 2017), the number of foreign trained skilled immigrants – ESL teachers included – who make Canada their home is steadily growing (CIC News, 2016) and most likely it will continue to increase in the future. This makes it paramount to move away from reducing individuals to labels such as non-natives toward a fair treatment of all Canadian citizens (whether they speak standard English or not, have an accent or not, or are Canadian born, citizens, permanent residents, immigrants, or refugees), genuine acceptance, and integration of people of different languages, accents, and identities.

Given the time constraints and the lack of participants, this research paper has not been finalized yet. Once completed, it could potentially benefit NES and NNES alike by contributing to: (a) a better understanding of what being a non-native ESL immigrant teacher in Canada entails; (b) the integration of foreign-born professionals in the Canadian labour market; and (c) acceptance of and better communication among individuals, regardless of their country of origin and first or second language. To formulate more in-depth ideas with regards to (a) the implications of standard English and world Englishes and (b) the interplay between language and identity from a NNES immigrant’s perspective, further research should

include: (a) participants (e.g., NNES students, teachers, and other professionals); (b) data collection (e.g., surveys, interviews); and (c) a longer timeframe.

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