Transacted Identities: Language and Self Negotiation in Interaction

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Abstract:
The present article aims to investigate how identity occurs dialogically – and not only – in social interaction, with personal and social identity overlapping and influencing each other, and the social actors transacting themselves based on their external cues. Identity negotiation, concept that stays at the core of our study, looks at the ways in which, starting from a specific agenda and precise goals, individuals engage in the creation of mutual identities, while also attempting to put on a favourable self-presentation for their interlocutors. The theoretical framework underpinning the research is set by the sociolinguistic paradigm, and the major importance attributed to language in the identity negotiation process is demonstrated in the second part of our research. The contribution concludes with some tentative observations and directions for further research.
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Identity negotiation can be quite a challenge, even more so in intercultural contexts. Just like beauty, identity is often a matter of perspective, as it is situated in the eyes of the beholder; thus, a simple meeting between two people can turn the otherwise unquestioned identity into a threatening responsibility. With this in mind, it can be said that people are drawn to partners and group members who validate them, who look at them through the lens of their own self-perception. In this regard, William Swann identified at least two principles that prove to be decisive for the outcome of the identity negotiation process:

(1) The first one, *the investment principle*, focuses on expectations. The higher the expectations during interaction, the more important they will be in the negotiation process: "the extent to which people feel that they know their own minds will determine the extent to which they work to bring the minds of others into harmony with their own views" (Swann, 2005: 79).

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(2) The second one, *the accessibility principle*, states the importance of possessing the right set of attributes that would help verify external expectations: “for people to strive to verify an expectancy, they must possess the mental resources and motivation required to access that expectancy” (Swann, 2005: 79).

Within the identity negotiation framework, the outcome of social interaction is influenced by both personal and social variables, that is to say one’s own history and objectives manifested in interaction are closely matched by the social roles and conventions. The main advantage granted by this twofold perspective is a more comprehensive understanding of alterity, which could never be reached from a personal or social perspective alone. And this is all the more challenging as identity is not something finite; it can only be understood as a process, as a becoming, and trying to fix it in well-defined frames is like trying to stop the water in a child’s fist. “Not even death can freeze the picture: there is always the possibility of a post mortem revision of identity (and some identities – that of the martyr, for example – can only be achieved beyond the grave)” (Jenkins, 1996: 4).

When engaging in interaction, people shape their social identity by projecting aspects of their personal identity onto it, as if providing the others with a guidebook to navigate their selves. In most cases – but also depending on the context –, they choose to only reveal one side of their personal identity, which is determined by their sensitivity to the society’s cues, as well as by the ability to control their behavior in response to those. Given one’s need to monitor oneself, most often motivated by the desire to preserve face, each individual manages that which can be seen by others according to the environment, thus putting on a performance (social manifestation) during which different faces are revealed to convey different facets of their identity. Such monitoring can manage other people’s perceptions, transmitting the right information at the right time.

Subscribing to the theories of renowned French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom identity is created in dialogue, the internal-external dialectic (the self-image versus the public image) takes shape. Hence, identity springs from self-awareness but this self-revelation flows toward self-recognition channeled by the other. Therefore, it can be said that identity always involves maintaining a dialogue with partners against whom and / or with whom each individual expresses his own individuality:

> people form self-views as a means of making sense of the world, predicting the responses of others, and guiding behavior. From this vantage point, self-views represent the ‘lens’ through which people perceive their worlds and organize their

> behavior. As such, it is critical that these 'lenses' remain stable. This explains why people are motivated to stabilize their self-views through a series of active behavioral and cognitive activities I dubbed 'self-verification processes'. (Swann, 2005: 70)

In his own right, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor places identity at the center of modern consciousness, which in his view is the essential condition for an individual's growth and, consequently, for freedom. For him, identity involves a double process of self-realization. On the one hand we have self-discovery, which equals the individual's ability to conceive his own subjectivity and, on the other hand, we speak about self-recognition in relation to another, which refers to the individual's ability to situate himself in the social environment that is given.

With the aim of assessing what is adequate, people are guided by situational and interpersonal cues. By understanding the social implications of contextual cues and the reactions of those around him, the individual receives social feedback to adjust his behaviour in accordance with the given situation, in a hope that the other's perception will reflect his desired image. As people engage socially, they constantly turn to their own experiences in their perception of otherness and of the environment in which they find themselves, thus presenting facets of their identity that they consider appropriate to the situation. This negotiation, however, takes place with a minimum conscious effort.

During social interaction, individuals 'write' themselves while simultaneously 'reading' the others; they 'edit' their own presentation in accordance with the reactions and presentations of those around them. This type of interaction is, fundamentally, a negotiation that takes place in a given social context, involving only certain aspects of the participants' identity. It often occurs without too much conscious analysis; people interact with each other naturally, revealing what they consider appropriate while assessing the information provided by the other. Given all this, social identity can be compared to a game – "a game of «playing the vis-à-vis»", whose rules are constantly negotiated.

> Social identity is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). Social identity is, therefore, no more essential than meaning; it too is the product of agreement and disagreement, it too is negotiable. (Jenkins, 1996: 5)

Referring to what Erving Goffman called the 'self-presentation' in interaction, we cannot overlook the uniqueness and variability of human beings. In the process of social interaction, individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their whole lives. And although we have some control over the signals we send out about ourselves, there is no way we can ensure their correct reception or

interpretation. Social identity, therefore, has a performative nature, being incorporated in social practice and language is seen "as a material and historical force which acts as the means by which individuals construct their personal, local, transnational and spiritual identities" (Gallardo, 2019: vii).

Further to this, one of the central ideas in Barth's studies is that it is not enough to convey a message about identity; that message must be accepted by others – people to whom we attribute greater importance ('significant others') – before an identity can be endorsed. As a consequence, identities are to be found and negotiated at the borderline between internal and external. So here is the answer to questions such as these: What would the relationship between the multiple components of such a polynomial identity be? Can there be a hierarchy among them? Can any of them be dominant? Does this polynomial identity have a face on which all these identity-bearing signs are engraved, or is it just a matrix devoid of substance?

By belonging simultaneously and/ or successively to several groups (of affiliation) or by relating to them as benchmarks (reference groups), individuals accumulate a multitude of roles and social identities. In this interactional game with otherness and with various social situations, the social actor resorts to this pool of multiple identities, bringing forward the identity he considers fit for that particular context and effective in obtaining the desired result. This phenomenon could be called situational or contextual identity, distinguished from that which, in specialist literature, is referred to as 'situated identity'. The latter refers to the fact that there is a tendency for an individual's self to be perceived by others in terms of the current social role he plays.

Therefore, we believe in the objectivity of this multiple identity framework but consider that a distinction based on the origin of identity could be made between 'artificial (constructed) identities', 'natural (native) identities' and 'supernatural (gifted) identities'. These can be expressed and endorsed, and can either be interconnected in a prioritized manner – by ordering them hierarchically – or be on a possible collision course with each other, leading to the exclusion or obliteration of some of these. We can distinguish between core identities (face, actor, ontology) and assumed identities (mask, roles, phenomenology); we often refer to a rational identity, an emotional identity and a volitional identity; to individual identities and collective identities; to community identities and statutory identities; to local, regional, continental, planetary identities; to national, transnational, supranational identities, etc.

Cultural Negotiation – The Sociolinguistic Paradigm

"In the beginning was the Word." This is how St. John the Apostle begins his Gospel, thus emphasizing the place and role of the word in human history. Words give life and their utterance shapes our being. They throb in the language and transpose us into a space of common existence, just as, after the flood, humanity was still united despite the subsequent diversity of people: "Now the whole world had one language and a common form of speech" (Genesis, 11: 1). And, given that a common language ensured unity and facilitated communication, an unexpected ambition sprang to people's minds: to build a tower that will reach the sky. Babel, an attempt to recreate paradise, aroused the wrath of the Creator who, feeling threatened by such a plan, dispersed peoples across many different lands and entangled their speech: "Come, let Us go down and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (Genesis, 11: 7).

Languages reflect people's thinking and describe the world around them; they weld communities together, facilitating communication among their members. This was to end soon, as differences between people eventually deepened with the spread of so many languages. With the collapse of the Tower of Babel and the emergence of so many linguistic options, people now have the opportunity to inhabit different worlds and to adapt their speech to each particular situation. For instance, legend has it that Charles V, Roman emperor of the sixteenth century, distributed his foreign language fluencies by speaking Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men and German to horses. But, beyond this openness to the worlds that hide behind the languages that envisage them, there have always been attempts at uniformity or feverish undertakings to reach the original language. Thus, historian Salimbene of Parma tells the story of the experiment through which, in the 13th century, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II tried to discover the primordial language spoken in Paradise. Frequently referred to as 'stupor mundi' due to his intellectual abilities and especially to his knowledge of so many languages (Italian, French, Latin, Greek, German and Arabic), the emperor

> wanted to discover which language and idiom children would use, on reaching adolescence, if they had never had the opportunity to speak to anyone. So he gave orders to the wet nurses and to the feeders to give the infants milk, prohibiting their talking to them. He wanted to find out whether the children would speak Hebrew, which was the first language, or else Greek or Latin or Arabic, or indeed if they did not always speak the language of their natural parents. But the experiment came to nothing, because all the babies or infants died. (Eco, 1995: ix)

A. Translation

Prior to being a linguistic exchange, translation presupposes a cultural transfer which requires that meta-point of view without which the translation process would be an amputated attempt to put the message of alterity into words. A form of cultural-linguistic globalization, it is "the enchanted utopia thanks to which we all have access to the great texts of mankind, it is the utopia in which we live and which we maintain by continuing to translate" (Vazaca, 2008: 3). To take this further:

> translation functions as a way of establishing transnational networks which are expansive in their ambition and reach. [...] Translation can contribute to movements of linguistic or cultural independence but only on condition that the state of independence is one of interdependence. As translation by definition involves a form of dependency on the source language and culture, the translational relationship is an interdependent one but is a form of dependency which is potentially enabling rather than confining or disabling. (Cronin, 2006: 36)

A puzzle that can only be deciphered through translation, globalization is the land of complexity, arousing disputes and anchoring language matters in a perpetual topicality. Without cultural sensitivity and a keen awareness of subtleties, no translation can ever be fully effective and critical errors can occur. For instance, if we are to turn to taboos and value differences between cultures, there are numerous examples of severe blunders that occurr due to a poor translation. In one instance, "when Nikita Khrushchev at the United Nations uttered the famous phrase *we will bury you* it was a culturally insensitive mistranslation from the Russian which really meant *we will outlast you*" (Ulatus, 14 Sept.).

Regardless of which language or languages (more or less) unanimously recognized to receive the attribute of sovereignty, by being the mediating language(s) used to translate between literatures, we believe, just like Umberto Eco, that this matter should be approached by means of negotiation. Such an approach will always be needed when translating, that is to say when transferring the signifier and the signified from one language, and implicitly from one culture, to another. Umberto Eco believes that this art of negotiation, inherent to the phenomenon of translation, must be linked to the phenomena of globalization, which bring together people of various cultures and languages.

Thus, what we mean by 'translating' in the light of negotiation is the "inner mechanism of a language and the structure of a certain text in that language", followed by the construction of a "copy of the textual mechanism, which, from a certain perspective, will be able to exert similar effects on the reader, both in a semantic and a syntactic field but

also in the stylistic, metric and phonosymbolic one, as well as the sentimental effects the source text tended to" (Eco, 2008: 17).

We have hereby reached the much debated dichotomy of fidelity vs. betrayal as, through translation, we will negotiate how the original text will be translated into the target text. And just as textual translations are a "form of representation in which parts or aspects of the source text come to stand for the whole" (Tymoczko, 1999: 55), we negotiate our own identities by choosing that side of our selves which best serve our purpose. Exiled from language and alienated in a new culture, we must, however, learn to translate ourselves in interpretation, by building a common world of understanding.

B. Code-switching

In the European space, multilingualism is an unquestionable reality and knowledge of several foreign languages is a necessity in the era of globalization. In order to face the challenges presented by the new realities, it was necessary to develop an intercultural dialogue as this has an important linguistic component, language being the most relevant expression of each culture. We can thus say that linguistic integration is at the core of social and cultural integration, this being a complicated process which often requires a series of compromises. Language constructs our realities so that, when exposed to a different culture, it is the first aspect that facilitates or hinders our communication; it is also here that those power relations that bear witness to the eternal struggles for the demarcation of national borders make their presence felt. But, beyond an immature linguistic protectionism in the current context, the interaction of languages is more and more frequent.

Studies regarding the interaction of languages date back to the 17th and 18th centuries, when foreign influences were considered to be undeniable acts of language corruption and foreign words 'barbarisms' that had to be eliminated at all costs. Unlike those times when the idea of linguistic segregation was welcomed by the majority, the current context attests to the increasingly frequent contacts between languages. Beyond the existence of a multitude of languages and cultures, a phenomenon that stands out above all is that of increasingly frequent commutations in the speech of bilinguals, resulted from their familiarity with several languages.

Code-switching is a form of manifestation of the interaction between languages and it can frequently be found in bilingualism and multilingualism, when speakers alternately choose words or phrases belonging to the languages they speak, especially in informal situations. In Romanian linguistics, the term 'code-switching' has been translated in several ways: 'linguistic exchange', 'code change' or 'code alternation', while in the English-speaking world, the term was first conceptualized by Gumperz, who described this phenomenon as a

discursive exchange that forms an interactive whole: "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz, 1982: 59). By 'systems' and 'subsystems' we do not only think of different languages, but also of other aspects of language, such as the phonological component, elements of prosody, lexical options and syntactic constructions.

The alternation of elements belonging to different languages has been criticized countless times, accusing speakers of corrupting the language and its grammar use, but also seeing this as a cultural agony or linguistic confusion caused by bilingualism and/or multilingualism. In a sociolinguistic framework, discussions related to code switching are characterized by a certain terminological confusion and by a tension between the different types of approaches to this phenomenon. At a macro level, linguistic variations are directly linked to social variables, thing that can be observed, for instance, in the research that analyzes the correlation between language options (code choices) and types of activity. On the other hand, micro-level approaches start from the idea that social factors do not fully regulate language choices, but rather consider this phenomenon to be a strategic tool that speakers use to create the desired social reality. While both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, we would say that a strictly macro approach to code switching analysis is too deterministic and often lacking in explanatory power, while a conversational analysis approach is too isolated from the wider context, which could provide an important framework for interpretation. We therefore consider that a more objective approach should aim to reflect the connection between social norms and personal options, since we already know that the individual is always at the crossroads between collective and personal determinations.

One of the most conclusive studies that provides a fundamental interface between micro and macro approaches, particularly relevant for our demonstration, is the one proposed by Ben Rampton, who refers to the phenomenon of 'crossing'. Rampton describes the term 'crossing' as a discursive practice of switching to another language/ dialect that does not belong to the speaker. While this act of transition may not always be a clear claim for another ethnic identity, these cultural boundary crossings require negotiation skills: "this kind of switching, in which there is a distinct sense of movement across social or ethnic boundaries, raises issues of legitimacy which participants need to negotiate in the course of their encounter" (Rampton, 1995: 280). What emerges from this study is that, through these linguistic crossings, speakers are able to abandon their own ethnicity for a while and to forge not only new affiliations, but even different identities. From a poststructuralist angle,

Rampton argues that identities (including ethnicity, class, gender, and other layers) are negotiated rather than fixed. These 'situated identities' become relevant at different times throughout the interaction, according to the objectives and communication needs, which is to say that the identities acquire meaning through the specific interactions in which they are activated.

The best-known sociolinguistic model for negotiating identities through code switching is the markedness model proposed by Myers-Scotton: "codeswitching patterns may be indicative of how speakers view themselves in relation to the socio-political values attached to the linguistic varieties used in codeswitching" (Myers Scotton, 1998: 99). This framework considers speech to be a negotiation of rights and obligations between the speaker and his interlocutor, and suggests that speakers have implicit knowledge of indexicality, that is to say knowledge of language and language options that are manifested or not during a given interaction. According to Myers-Scotton, speakers opt for a language that can epitomize the rights and obligations they want to apply in the given exchange and that can present the appropriate identities. In choosing the unmarked option, speakers recognize the status quo as the basis for the speech act. Conversely, the choice of a marked option indicates the attempt to negotiate a different balance of rights and obligations, even a different identity.

An extremely illustrative classification of the languages when it comes to code-switching is put forth by Carol Myers Scotton: the 'matrix language' and the 'embedded language' (Myers Scotton, 1998: 61), the alternating languages in communication reflecting the identity of the speakers. Language shapes our reality in different ways and, with it, thinking changes too. "We live a new life with every new language we speak", as the Czech proverb goes, and this code switching can indeed point to a dual identity in some cases. For example, a person born to Indian parents in England, who settled in Germany, will experience this split identity with every word. However, in many other contexts, code switching can be explained by something totally different, namely the speakers' language skills. It is, therefore, natural – even when a certain situation requires the use of a foreign language – to seek the safety of the 'soil' into which we are solidly rooted, namely our mother tongue. And this is because, just as the environments of our existence differ, their content, detailed through language, will be expressed in various ways.

All this being said, we can conclude that identity is an interactional product, negotiated and produced in and through discourse. This discursive approach sees the relationship between language and identity as mutually constitutive in at least two different ways. On the one hand, languages – or rather certain discourses within them – provide the terms

and other linguistic means by which identities are constructed and negotiated. On the other hand, linguistic and identity-laden ideologies guide the ways in which individuals use language resources to index their own identities and to assess the language resources used by the others. To speak in a certain language means to belong to a certain linguistic community; to speak several languages can be a sign of identity and loyalty switch, occurring within the same person.

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