

# Grażyna Łopuszańska

---

## Language in Ethnic and National Identity

---

Studia Germanica Gedanensia 16, 147-154

---

2008

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Gdańsk 2008, Nr. 16

Grażyna Łopuszańska  
Instytut Filologii Germańskiej  
Uniwersytet Gdański

## Language in Ethnic and National Identity

The idea of conceptualized identity is differently perceived from the theoretical perspective of different scientific disciplines. From the linguistic perspective it is limited to the concept of identification by language, which is considered to be the basic structural element in the culture and tradition of specific social groups. Looking at the concept of identity in this way it becomes necessary to take into account the phenomenological sociological orientation, which assumes that the sense of belonging to a particular community carries with it a constant process of self-definition and evaluation in the context of one's membership in the particular society, which in turn constitutes a permanent form of social integration which naturally arises from an objective historical process. Every human collective is characterized by frequent interaction through the use of language. Knowledge and emotional states are objectivized by the use of language, making language subordinate to the objective factual sphere and at the same time turning it into a means for connecting an individual with the external world which is beyond the reach of his or her direct experience (Starosta 1999: 40–53).

From the sociological phenomenological perspective cultural and ethnic identification with a particular society takes place via the recognition of a collection of symbolic values, created and cultivated by a group, as one's own. Language is the basic element in the construction of culture and tradition, being at the same time *a manifestation of social consciousness leading to the retention of social identity and group cohesion*. (Latoszek 1990). Territory, in the phenomenological sense, does not play a significant role in the formation of identity. Bokszański (1997: 27–35; 53–67) emphasizes that as a result of the constant ongoing reconstruction and progressive changes in the social order individual identity necessarily becomes an open process, not capable of final definition (Bokszański 1989).

In discussing the concept of social and national identity from the sociological point of view, Dittmar (1997), Löffler (1994), and Fix (2003) all treat language as a carrier of group (regional, national) cultural values and social

identification. Language constitutes one of the most critical links in connecting individual identification with that of a given national or regional group, creating a communication community. In the collective dimension *it is language which determines the 'differentness' felt by one group with regard to others, and it is language which constitutes a given group's cohesion, permanence, and uniqueness* (Sługocki 1990: 17). It thus constitutes a symbolic value deciding upon the existence and coherence of a particular group.

The self-identification of an individual with a given society has two aspects. On one hand it represents a symbolic cultivation of solidarity within a particular group, while on the other it also represents a demonstrative manifestation of otherness vis a vis other social, ethnic, or national groups. The numerical size of the group is irrelevant for the evaluation and assignment to a given language the formation of its own communication community, just as it is irrelevant in assigning a language a symbolic value. National minorities identify much more strongly than great nations with their own ethnic groups within a small language community, and for them language constitutes not a tool to social or economic development, but the only possible means for their self-expression and identification with an ethnic or national community. The emotional ties they have to their language are also not without significance, as they constitutes the key to their feelings of integration and identity, strengthening their consciousness of their separate tradition and culture.

In the case of national or ethnic minorities, or in a situation where there is a dichotomy between one's spoken language and the official national language, the two languages are symbolically assessed differently: one as the language of a minority ethnic group, and the other as the language of the dominating group. The official language becomes a symbol of power, often foreign (as was the case during Hitler's occupation), while the language used separately by a the minority group comes to symbolize solidarity and constitutes a form of identification with the group.

This differentiation as to the symbolic value of two languages, or their modifications or dialects – *language of power and language of solidarity* – is of great significance in socio-linguistic discussions concerning linguistic differences and their relation to the social level or caste of a particular group (Gumperz: 1975; Głowiński: 1980). Bernstein elaborates on the issue of using different languages in different social environments by introducing the concept of developed and limited codes (Bernstein 1990).

The mother tongue constitutes an exceptionally strong element in the formation of internal contacts and the creation of a sense of community in those cases where the official language of communication is imposed from on high by colonial powers. In such instances local variations or dialects achieve a much greater prestige than they are usually accorded. This is also true in terms of the sense of confidence or identity of the user of such local dialects, and extends as well to the external perception of such speakers by other persons speaking related regional dialects (for more on this, see Coulmas 1985).

The symbolic significance of language in terms of personal stability and identity is increased in multi-lingual societies (i.e., where there are recognized national minorities, regional languages, or in bi- or multi-lingual states such as Canada or Switzerland). In order for an individual to identify with a group they must assign the same functional value, in terms of creating identity, to the use of a given language as the remaining members of the group. This phenomenon is sometimes known as 'linguistic loyalty' to a given group, which is also a reflection of the functional value of language. In such situations there may be a sliding scale of national ambivalence, in which a language user neither fully accepts nor definitively rejects either his or her own ethnic culture, nor the central national culture. An attitude of national and cultural ambivalence is typical of members of a collective whose multi-lingualism arises from imposed loyalties to various linguistic states, which is also associated with imposed multi-lingualism.

An attitude of national ambivalence may also occur when an individual assigns great significance to the use of a particular language, in the situation of so-called 'voluntary multi-lingualism, where the decision to identify with the language and culture of another community is based on the sole decision of an individual.

The problem of ambivalent national identification in the context of the linguistic behaviour of ethnic groups in multi-lingual conditions was the subject of research by Oppenrieder and Thurmair. The observations they carried out proved that a child, even living in the environment of his or her primary language, will willingly and quickly pick up another language, or even languages, of high prestige. The learning of a language perceived as having a low functional value and low prestige encounters many more difficulties. The foregoing holds true regardless of whether the bi- or multi-lingual person is living in his or her primary language environment or in a foreign language environment and is strictly connected with identification with a regional or national group. The demonstrated preference to use a particular language for interpersonal communications in a multi-linguistic environment takes on a symbolic significance as a manifestation of belonging to a particular cultural community.

The question whether a multi-lingual individual treats his or her use of a particular language as a personal symbolic manifestation of identity, or whether he or she is guided by purely pragmatic considerations and treats each language as a communication code, choosing to use a particular language in order to avoid interference in interpersonal communications, depends on the type of multi-lingualism each individual possesses, as well as the degree of competence or mastery of each language by said individual.

The authors distinguish between several types of multi-lingualism, which are conditioned by non-linguistic factors. Territorial multilingualism and multi-lingualism caused by migration are both considered to be types of forced multilingualism. In the case of voluntary multi-lingualism the choice of language for interpersonal communications is not dependent on individual

predispositions or cultivated symbols, nor on the desire to manifest a sense of belonging to a particular social group. The most important and decisive roles are played by the degree of mastery of a given language as well as its prestige, although a certain role may also be played by individual attitudes as well as the functional efficiency of a given language in everyday situations.

Classic multilingualism occurs in situations of migration, when an individual or an entire group of persons find themselves within a single-language community where the only multi-functional language is not their own, and their ethnic language fulfills the verbal code function only within their own families or in their own defined community. A feeling of alienation may result, leading to ethnic separateness. Conflicts may arise between the dominant language and the primary minority language, eroding loyalty to the dominant language, which is for the majority of the society a permanent element in their sense of belonging and (self) identity. This type of multilingualism is labelled as 'undesirable' or 'ignored' (Oppenrieder/Thurmair 2003: 47). The Kurdish language used by the Kurdish minority in Turkey is an example of such a language.

The assessment of multi-lingualism and the individual dispositions of particular members of regional and national groups for particular languages is and will remain significant so long as diversity, variety, and multiplicity are considered as threats to the permanence of a given culture and its feeling of distinctiveness and identity. The creation of a positive identification with one's own community and ethnic (or primary) language is dependent on one's individual attitude towards multi-lingualism. Supra linguistic conditions also play a significant role in formulating the conditions which will determine whether a given multi-lingual situation will be considered as 'imposed' or 'voluntary'. The social prestige of a given language is also very important. Voluntary, informed, and thus controlled multi-lingualism does not threaten the existence of a positive sense of self-identification with one's own linguistic community and culture, and in the event that one's language enjoys a high prestige this becomes an additional element strengthening the positive assessment of one's social group and constitutes a motivation to make one's language into a primary regional, ethnic, or national language.

In the event multi-lingualism is imposed rather than voluntary, there is a great likelihood that both the individual members of the social minority as well as the group as a whole will feel that their sense of self-identity is threatened, thus interpreting the necessity to use another language as a threat to the continuation of their own culture and language. A consequence of enforced multi-lingualism is usually a permanent feeling of being threatened, which results in a state of suspension between two real, objective worlds and a feeling of instability. This can be seen in the whole gamut of emigration literature as well as in the observations concerning Turkish ghettos in Germany. Persons operating under such pressures often resort to mixing the two languages, a phenomenon Gumperz calls 'code-switching'. In the research into code-switching conducted by Gumperz (1982) and Romaine

(1995) in various contexts among multi-lingual persons, such language users almost uniformly assessed language mixing as negative.

If however the acquisition of a second language and culture does not lead to feelings of alienation and ethnic separateness, and the secondary language, culture and values cultivated thereby are not viewed as a threat and an imposed change of self-identity, language, and identification with an ethnic group, then multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism are encouraged by a multi-linguistic identification and the speaking of a mixed language is viewed as a positive characteristic allowing identification with a multi-linguistic group. This is confirmed by the research of Lüdi (1982) into Gumperz's observations, mainly with reference to the young generation of Turks settled in Germany.

The new shape of self-identification with a multi-cultural society, reflected in the use, mixing, and alteration of various languages, takes place only with regard to relatively large and stable groups of emigrants, such as the German Turks. It is not clear whether this type of multi-lingualism, even though positively assessed by its own minority society, can become a stable element supporting self-identification with one's own minority social group and functioning internally in a decidedly uni-lingual environment, nor is it clear to what extent identification with one's own social group by code-switching can take on a permanent symbolic value distinguishing that group from others.

In considering the issue of multilingualism with relation to individual language users one is usually dealing with the phenomenon of individual, voluntary multi-lingualism. While this situation may in fact loosen the social ties of a bi- or multi-linguistic person with his or her own social group, yet in the assessment of both such a bi- or multi-linguistic person as well as the assessment of the surrounding society such multi-lingualism is seen as an enrichment of said individual and not perceived as a threat to the self-identification of the user with his or her own social group. An additional positive attribute of such multi-lingualism is the possibility to choose between languages. This type of multi-lingualism does not introduce any negative influences on the user's self-identification via his or her choice of language for interpersonal communication (Wandruszka 1979).

A special case of the conscious creation of one's national self-identification by choosing one's language of interpersonal communication is provided by the conscious rejection of the use of one's primary language. The rejection of this language constitutes a symbolic annihilation of the negative images connected with the language group, as was the case with German emigrants during the Nazi era. In rejecting their primary language and choosing a new one, they were searching for a place in a linguistic community with whose values they wished to identify in both their everyday verbal communications as well as in their ethnic aspects.

In summary it should be noted that multi-lingual situations are a complicated phenomena, and the consequences of using a particular language or dialect in interpersonal communication on a user's national, regional, or

ethnic (self) identity is always dependent on supra-linguistic factors. The multi-lingualism of an individual, or even an entire social group, may be either a positive or negative phenomenon. At the positive extreme lies a conscious choice of voluntary multi-lingualism, which increases an individual's sense of self-worth and identity without threatening any other group, and at the negative extreme is the forced rejection of one's mother tongue owing to supra-linguistic circumstances. The reasons for all linguistic behaviour are always rooted in extra-linguistic circumstances which mold a user's attitude towards his or her mother tongue, primary tongue, ethnic tongue, and foreign tongue.

The problems associated with assessing one's own ethnic or primary tongue, which is connected with one's attitude towards other languages, and role this process plays in conditioning one's identification with defined values and national symbols, are becoming more acute in the light of European integration. The current socio-economic-political conditions are enhancing the role of English in every sphere of life, and English is becoming the primary language of communication within EU institutions. Yet while the EU is building a unified political, economic, and monetary system it is not taking steps towards enforced multi-lingualism, but rather is implementing policies aimed at respect for particular national and ethnic groups and their languages. One of the conditions of membership in the EU is respect for national minority rights, including the right to learn in one's native tongue. As an example of an ethnic group formulating its identity in reliance on cultivation of its ethnic tongue and culture one may cite the Polish Kashubians, who obtained the right to study in their own dialect only after 1990. One can observe great care on the part of the European Union to preserve the linguistic behaviours and traditions of ethnic groups, including the self-identification of members of such groups with their own language. And although the preferred working language of the EU is English, discussions in the Council of the European Union can always take place in national languages, with the aid of interpreters.

If the aim of the European collective society is to create a common European identification, this aim cannot be accomplished by the imposition of a mandatory language inasmuch as the historical traditions and culture of European states are so intertwined with their national languages, including identification with ethnic languages, that any efforts to impose linguistic assimilation would undoubtedly meet with decided opposition.

## Bibliography

- Bernstein, B. (1980): Socjolingwistyka a społeczne problemy kształcenia, [in:] M. Głowiński (ed.): *Język i społeczeństwo*. Warszawa.
- Bernstein, B. (1990): *Odtwarzanie kultury*. Warszawa.
- Bokszański, Z. (1989): *Tożsamość. Interakcja. Grupa. Tożsamość jednostki w perspektywie teorii socjologicznej*. Łódź.

- Bokszański, Z. (1997): Tożsamość narodowa. Pojęcie i problematyka, [in:] Czyżewski, A. Piotrowski, A. Duszowska-Pawełek (eds.): *Biografia a tożsamość narodowa*. Łódź, 27–5.
- Bokszański, Z. (1997): Obrazy innych etnicznych a tożsamość narodowa, [in:] Czyżewski, A. Piotrowski, A. Duszowska-Pawełek (eds.): 53–6.
- Coulmas, F. (1985): *Sprache und Staat. Studien zu Sprachplanung und Sprachpolitik*. Berlin, New York.
- Dittmar, N. (1997): *Grundlagen der Soziolinguistik*. Tübingen.
- Fix, U. (2003): Identität durch Sprache – eine nachträgliche Konstruktion?, [in:] Janich, N., Thim-Mabrey, Ch. (eds.): *Sprachidentität – Identität durch Sprache*. Tübingen.
- Gumperz, J.J. (1982): *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge.
- Gumperz, J.J. (1975): *Sprache, lokale Kultur und soziale Identität. Theoretische Beiträge und Fallstudien*. Düsseldorf.
- Janich, N. (2003): Sprachidentität in der germanischen Forschung und Lehre. Resüme und Ausblick, [in:] Janich, N., Thim-Mabrey, Ch. (2003) (eds.): *Sprachidentität – Identität durch Sprache*. Tübingen.
- Latoszek, M. (1990): *Etniczność jako czynnik struktury społeczności lokalnych*, [in:] B. Jałowiecki (ed.): *Region, Miasto, Osiedle*. Warszawa.
- Löffler, H. (1994): *Germanistische Soziolinguistik*. Berlin.
- Lüdi, G. (1996): *Migration und Mehrsprachigkeit*. [in:] H. Goebel et al. (eds.): *Kontaktlinguistik. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*; 1. Halbbd. Berlin, New York, 320–327.
- Oppenrieder, W./Thurmair, M. (2003): Sprachidentität im Kontext von Mehrsprachigkeit, [in:] Janich, N., Thim-Mabrey, Ch. (eds.): *Sprachidentität – Identität durch Sprache*. Tübingen, 39–60.
- Romaine, S. (1995): *Bilingualism*. Oxford.
- Sługocki, R. (1990): *Zagadnienia regionalizmu i tożsamości regionalnej*. Bydgoszcz.
- Starosta, P. (1999): *Tożsamość regionalna w perspektywie socjologicznej*, [in:] Matczak, A. (eds.): *Badania nad tożsamością regionalną*, Łódź, 40–53.
- Wandruszka, M. (1979): *Die Mehrsprachigkeit des Menschen*. München.

## Identyfikacja etniczna i narodowa poprzez język

### Streszczenie

Sytuacje wielojęzyczności są zjawiskami złożonymi, a ich konsekwencje w odniesieniu do samoidentyfikacji z własną grupą etniczną, narodową czy regionalną poprzez używanie w procesie komunikacji interpersonalnej określonego języka bądź dialektu, zależne są zawsze od warunków pozajęzykowych. Wielojęzyczność jednostki, jak też całych społeczności może być pozytywna i zarazem negatywna w skutkach, poczynając od pozytywnego wzbogacenia osobowości, wzmocnienia samooceny i samoidentyfikacji z grupą poprzez dobrowolny wybór języka, a na świadomym odrzuceniu i zmianie języka macierzystego skończywszy. Przyczyną takich, a nie innych

zachowań językowych są zawsze warunki pozajęzykowe, które kształtują nastawienia do języka prymarnego, macierzystego, etnicznego i obcego.

Problemy związane z oceną własnego języka etnicznego lub prymarnego i związane z tym nastawienia do innych języków, uznanie języka za czynnik w dużym stopniu warunkujący identyfikację z określonymi wartościami i symbolami narodowymi, stają się w obliczu jednoczenia się Europy szczególnie wyraziste.