Changing identities

The role of language in migration:
A life-course perspective

Identitäten im Wandel

Die Rolle der Sprache bei Migration:
Eine lebensbegleitende Perspektive

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interrelations between language, identity and migration through the retrospective viewpoint of two European Jewish migrants arriving in Israel in the late 1940's. Their individual migration experiences and the concomitant change of their main languages coincide with a larger scale attempt at forging a new national identity in the then newly established State of Israel. Based mainly on the analysis of interviews, but also drawing on Social Identity Theory and the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, it is suggested that language may be – and in this case has been – used as a means to establish a new identity and distance oneself from an older, unwanted one. Finally, some parallels with other migration contexts are considered and ideas for future research are suggested.

Keywords

changes in identity; migration; impact of language; life-course perspective

Kurzzusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Sprache, Identität und Migration anhand der retrospektiven Erzählung der Lebensgeschichte zweier in den späten 1940er Jahren nach Israel emigrierten europäischen Juden. Ihre individuellen Migrationserfahrungen und der einhergehende Wechsel ihrer Hauptsprache fallen hierbei mit dem politischen Versuch zusammen, eine neue

nationale Identität in dem damals neugegründeten israelischen Staat zu etablieren. Hauptsächlich auf der Analyse der Interviews basierend, aber auch durch Verknüpfungen mit Social Identity Theory und Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory wird die Hypothese aufgestellt, dass Sprache als Mittel zur Etablierung einer neuen Identität bzw. zur Abwendung von einer alten, unerwünschten Identität dienen kann – und im vorliegenden Fall dies auch tut. Zum Schluss werden mögliche Parallelen mit anderen Migrationskontexten besprochen sowie Ideen zu weiterführender Forschung vorgeschlagen.

Schlüsselwörter

Veränderung der Identität; Migration; Einfluss von Sprache; lebensbegleitende Perspektive

1   Introduction and theoretical considerations

The present study investigates the role that language plays in the process of migration from one country/culture to another, specifically exploring the relationship between language and identity, in order to better understand the ways language might be used as a means to establish a new identity or neglect an older one and the ways identification with a certain cultural group can prompt the learning of a new language.

This study focuses on the stories of the author's grandparents; both of whom immigrated to Israel from Europe (Hungary and Slovakia) following the Second World War. Although their case represents a particular type of migration process under specific circumstances, some of the themes that came up during the interviews shed light on the relationship between language, identity and immigration in general.

The question which sparked the interest for this study and has served as its point of departure was why two people with a shared mother tongue (Hungarian) and who had met in another country would decide to speak the language of the new place with one another, rather than their common first language. This is a rather uncommon phenomenon for the majority of migrants. As such, it serves as an important example of the strong interrelations between language and identity. An examination of these interrelations, based on this and on counter examples, can help to develop a better understanding of migrants' experiences and eventually lead to developing better models of integration.

1.1   Migration, language and (social) identity

Migration constitutes a major rupture in a person's life (see, e.g., Zittoun, 2007, for a comprehensive single case account of the life trajectory of a migrant). It involves adjustment at many levels and losses of various kinds: loss of significant people and culture, loss of an internal sense of harmony, loss of familiarity, and often a loss of one's mother tongue (Tannenbaum, 2007; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). At the same time, it is a source of change: Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible. One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well (Espin, 2006). One of the most influential models depicting the various ways migrants deal with the immigration process and adjust to a new culture is the acculturation model suggested by Berry (1997, 2001), which posits four acculturation strategies: integration (which involves maintaining one's own cultural identity while at the same time becoming a member of the host culture), assimilation (giving up one's own cultural identity and becoming absorbed in the host culture), separation (maintaining one's own cultural identity and rejecting involvement with the host culture) and marginalization (whereby the individual rejects both their own culture and the host culture).

Identity is a concept that is as often used as it is misused in the social sciences (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, for a critical review on this subject). For the sake of simplicity, this article will employs the notion of social identity as it is defined by Tajfel (1978), "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of a membership of a social group (or groups) together with the

value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people derive a sense of self-esteem from the groups they belong to and hence strive to view their social identity as positive. The strategies that people might utilize in order to achieve a positive social identity are manifold and depend on the ways they perceive the intergroup relationship in terms of status hierarchies, permeability of group boundaries and the perceived stability and legitimacy of the intergroup status hierarchy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Relevant to this study is the strategy of 'individual mobility,' which social identity theory suggests is employed when an individual experiences low in-group status and perceives permeable group boundaries and therefore dissociates themselves from their in-group and seeks to join the higher-status out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (Giles & Johnson, 1987) draws on social identity theory to predict the circumstances under which people belonging to minority groups will tend to maintain or neglect their ethnolinguistic identities by either striving to retain their in-group's language or alternatively adopting the language of the dominant group. In similar fashion to the predictions of social identity theory, the ethno-linguistic theory argues that the tendency to neglect one's in-group language and adopt the language of the dominant group will increase when (a) identification with the in-group is weak, (b) the in-group's status is perceived as low and (c) the group boundaries are perceived as permeable.

Language is a core aspect of one's identity and provides a basis of support for it (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). Language loss and its concomitant sense of identity loss and transformation are one of the most powerful components of the immigrant experience (Espín, 2006). As Espín points out, immigrants' resistance or willingness to learn the new language of the host country is related to how important it is to them to preserve their other identity, which partly might also explain why the young learn faster (Espín, 2006).

1.2   The case of Israel and Hebrew

The relationship between Hebrew and Israel is a rather unique one in comparison to most other languages and countries. Being a state founded on immigration even prior to its establishment in 1948, Hebrew has played a central role in the nation-building process of Israel and in creating a sense of national identity (Safran, 2005). Furthermore, Safran states, though being an ancient language, Hebrew was not used as a language of everyday communication for roughly 2,000 years, but was rather reserved for religious contexts. Its revival as a spoken language during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was intertwined with the rise of Zionism in Europe and part of its basic ideology. As Safran (2005) points out, among Zionists, there was a "growing sentiment that the Zionist enterprise had to be accompanied by a revival of the Hebrew language" (p. 48). Yiddish, as the language spoken by a large part of the European Jews, "was to be discarded because it was associated with the impoverished Jewish masses and inseparable from the diaspora ghettos" (Safran, 2005., p. 48). Hebrew thus became one of the main factors in the efforts to weld together Jews arriving to Israel from many lands. The newly established State of Israel adopted a melting pot policy

concerning immigration as well as vast efforts to ensure everyone learned Hebrew (Tannenbaum, 2007).

Viewed in the light of Zionism as a movement concerned with the goal of creating a Jewish national identity, the revival of Hebrew can thus be seen as an attempt to shift away from the diasporic and religious identity towards a non-diasporic secular one.

1.3   Focus of the present study

Taking the aforementioned theoretical background into consideration, as well as the social and political context in which the migration and life story described below took place, this article will investigate the following questions: What role did language play in the interviewees' migration process and how is it related to changes in their identities caused by migration? What were the interviewees' motivations for making Hebrew their main language of communication? How did the interviewees use languages in order to assert or establish their identities?

2   Method

For the purpose of answering these questions, three interviews were conducted in total, each lasting approx. 45 minutes. After establishing informed consent, the first two interviews, held separately for each of the participants, were conducted according to the Problem Centered Interview method (Witzel, 2000). They started with an introductory question ("Could you tell me about the time when you decided to immigrate to Israel?"), then turning to questions centered on the research problem. Questions needed for clarification or for addressing specific themes which came up during the interviews were added on the spot. A third interview was held a few days later with both participants together, addressing questions regarding their joint life and adding some follow up questions to the first interviews. Holding the third interview at a separate date from the first two enabled the interviewees to reflect upon the themes discussed before and further elaborate on them. All interviews were held in Hebrew, recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Later, relevant parts were translated into English by the researcher, paying special attention to transferring the stylistic nuances in the best possible way through the translation.

The interviewees were selected due to the researcher's prior knowledge of them and their life stories, which inspired the research idea. In this sense, the close emotional relationship between the interviewees and the researcher is viewed by the researcher as advantageous, both due to the fact that mutual trust existed prior to the research and enabled the interviewees to speak more openly, and because prior knowledge of the researcher regarding the interviewees lives enabled him to present questions that were more concrete and profound. It is nevertheless clear that the data emerging from the interviews would have been different, had a neutral interviewer conducted them, instead of the interviewees' grandson. For the analysis of the interviews, passages from the transcriptions relevant to the relationship between language and identity were first marked and then coded into categories which make up the themes presented in the results section.

3   Results

The analysis of the interviews resulted in 3 main themes regarding the interrelations between language and identity and according to which the results section is structured. The first theme concentrates on the life story of H. and demonstrates the relation between changes in the place and role of the various languages spoken by her and changes in her identity over the course of her life. In addition, this section is also intended as a sort of introduction to the following ones, providing a broader context in which to understand the rest of the results. The second theme provides examples for instances in which the interviewees have chosen to use a specific language instead of another possible one, as a way to assert or establish their identity. The last theme describes the motivations that have driven the interviewees to learn Hebrew and make it their primary language.

3.1   Relocating, its impact on language use, and the complexity of identities

Both interviewees emigrated a number of times during the course of their lives from one country to another. As a result of those transitions, and especially of the political circumstances leading to their migration from Hungary/Slovakia to Israel, their identities (in the sense of belonging to a cultural group or a nation) underwent changes and became more complex. Concomitant to those changes of identity were changes in the languages they spoke and changes in the place or role each language had for them. Focussing on H's life story (due to the fact that she has supplied more information in this regard), the following section will describe those changes in language and identity across her life in a chronological manner and the ways she has negotiated these complexities.

Having grown up in former Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia) to a Hungarian mother and a Slovak father, H. knew both those languages well. However, as she described in her interview, each of these languages was used in different and specific contexts during her childhood years and thus had distinct places in her life. While Hungarian was the main language her parents used when speaking to her and the language in which her mother sung children's songs to her, Slovakian was used in both kindergarten and school, when reading books or conversing with her peer-group, and generally the more actively used language of both. In fact, as she explained, she always answered her parents in Slovakian, even though they spoke Hungarian to her. This last point seems especially related to the notion of identity, as she defined herself at the time very much as a Slovakian. In her own words: "I was a very proud Slovakian, very much as a child... I danced all the folk dances and always performed in the traditional clothes." (H., Interview 1). This sense of identity was disrupted with the onset of the Second World War and as a result of the holocaust, with this disruption serving as a base for her later decision to immigrate to Israel in 1949 with a Zionist youth movement, independently of her parents. She explained:

> I was such a proud Slovakian and when... what happened has happened... it hurt me very much, it was like a betrayal in me personally... and it stayed, this feeling of being let down, like your home lets you down... it has stayed with me until today... (H., Interview 1)

After moving to Israel, learning and speaking Hebrew became a primary goal for her, even to the extent that she began speaking Hebrew with peers she had known before and with whom she previously spoke Slovakian. This high motivation to make Hebrew her primary language can be understood as reflecting the need to form a new identity and to neglect the old one (this point will be further elaborated in the following sections). After a few years in Israel, a new hierarchy between the languages she could now speak was established, reflecting her identity shift. Additionally, each of those languages was used in different contexts: Hebrew became her primary language of communication, used when speaking with native Israelis (Tsabars) but also with young people who could speak Slovakian or Hungarian. While H. continued to speak Slovakian with her parents or when writing a diary during her first years in Israel, over time she employed it less and less and it increasingly became associated with the older generation. Her use of Hungarian had diminished even more and only became relevant again after meeting her future husband. The following citation is used to illustrate her distinct use of languages at the time, while pointing to the associations of the different languages with either the past or the future:

> After two or three years in Israel it was already awkward for me to speak Hungarian or Slovakian with any of the young people. Only with my parents. I mean these were languages... that belonged to the past. And this is why with the adults, it was OK. But with the young people I never did. (H., Interview 1)

Despite the fact that Hebrew and her new Israeli identity became more prevalent, her previous identity was not abandoned altogether. Even though she and her future husband, a native Hungarian, spoke Hebrew with each other from the moment they met, the fact that they had a shared identity was meaningful for her, as shown by the following citation:

> It was very important to me that he spoke Hungarian (...) When it came to marrying, or to closer relationships... I was much more convenient with someone that was very similar (...) in this regard that foreignness.... about Hebrew and about Tsabars did emerge. (H., Interview 1)

After getting married, H. and N. moved to the United States for six years for the purpose of N's studies. There, again, each language was used by them in a different context, reflecting a different part of their identity: Hebrew was used between them and with Israeli friends they actively sought out; Hungarian was used with adult family members living in the United States; and English was used at work, with strangers and with relatives from the younger generation.

Finally, another noteworthy point came up during the interview with H., regarding the change in the place and meaning of her mother tongue (Slovakian) towards the later part of her life. This was her primary language until she immigrated to Israel at the age of 13, but since then she has hardly used it. During the interview she mentioned on several occasions the importance for her at old age to know it again:

> It is very very important for me today to know it again... all of a sudden... I cannot explain why (...) next to the bed I have a children's book in Slovakian. [speaking in a more quiet tone] I don't know where it comes from, maybe really from being nostalgic to... to being young...

and remembering this time perhaps. I don't really contemplate about it. But it exists. (H., Interview 1)

She summarized her renewed interest for her mother tongue by highlighting the relationship between language and identity as she sees it: "You cannot disconnect yourself emotionally from the [first] language... your first identity as a child still stays there somewhere." (H., Interview 1)

3.2   Identity-driven choice of language

During the course of the interviews, a number of examples were brought up by both interviewees from different points in their life, in which they had either refused to speak a specific language or had consciously chosen to use one language instead of another one. The first example was given by H. and refers to her childhood years in a general sense. As already mentioned in the previous section, she insisted on talking to her parents in Slovakian, although they spoke to her in Hungarian. This preference, especially taking into account her self description as a "proud Slovakian" at the time, can be understood as an attempt to position herself in terms of identity as a Slovakian. A second example, taken from H's first months in Israel, illustrates how this conscious choice of language can be used, not only by the individual, but also in a relationship or a group setting, thereby mutually constructing a (new) identity. At the time H., aged 14, was living with some 40 other immigrant youth (mostly from Slovakia) in a temporary youth village in Israel. Though most of them had a shared mother tongue and were only beginning to learn Hebrew, they would talk in broken Hebrew with each other. The following citation, taken from H's interview and referring to one of her best friends, is used to illustrate:

> [In Slovakia] we had every year these summer camps. I met her there. And there of course we only spoke Slovakian because we did not know any Hebrew. But when we came to Israel with the youth movement... with mistakes or without... we spoke Hebrew. And I never spoke with her Slovakian again. (H., Interview 1)

This example is especially powerful since it deals with a relationship that was already established in a different language. Being so, the choice of speaking another language was unnatural and represented a conscious cut from the past and a new start.

A further example, given by N., refers to the time in which he was a soldier in the Israeli army, shortly after arriving in Israel. Talking about the negative stereotypes the native Israeli soldiers held towards the newly arrived immigrants from Europe, he mentioned how he would insist on speaking in Hebrew (which he hardly knew) with the other immigrant soldiers, even though it would have been easier to understand each other in Yiddish. This was especially the case when native Israelis were present, but not only then. A fourth and final example was given by H. and refers to the time she was going to high-school in Israel and was already quite well integrated. Describing the arrival of a new boy to her class which had just immigrated from Hungary, she shared the following anecdote: "Everybody laughed at him because he also dressed like in the diaspora. So I very much tried to be friendly to him. I helped him a lot and gave him all my notebooks . . . but we never spoke Hungarian".

Those instances can be regarded as attempts by the individuals to position themselves in their social world in ways that are either in line with their identity or with how they wish to be perceived by others in terms of identity. In other words, these are examples of how people use language in order to either assert or construct their identity.

3.3   Motivations for making Hebrew the primary language of communication

Both interviewees were highly motivated to learn Hebrew and to make it their main language of communication from the point they decided to immigrate to Israel. During the course of the interviews they suggested three distinct, albeit interrelated motivations for doing so. Three interrelated: 1. Social pressure (e.g. in the form of stereotypes in the host society towards the new immigrants); 2. Wish to belong; 3. Wish to leave the past behind and form a new identity. The following excerpts, from the interviews are intended to illustrate those different motives, with some passages referring to more than one motive:

Social Pressure

The theme of social pressure as a source of motivation to learn Hebrew was apparent in the narratives of both interviewees. The pressure was especially related to stereotypes in the Israeli society of the time towards immigrants from post-war Europe and involved feelings of shame.

> (...) we actually were ashamed to speak another language, (...) In the army especially it was important, that you wanted to be like they are [the Tsabars]. If not, you were... those who only spoke Yiddish were looked down on. (N., Interview 3)

> it [coming from the diaspora] was not something to be proud of. (...) Until the Eichmann process people regarded all the holocaust survivors as lambs led to the slaughter, that did not do anything [to resist] etc. etc. (H., Interview 3)

Wish to belong

The wish to belong as a source of motivation for learning Hebrew was also apparent in the interviews. Although the desire is strongly related to the theme of social pressure, it is distinct to the extent that it reflects a more inner desire to be part of a collective and is not only a reaction to the outside world. The following passage, taken from the interview with H. but referring also to N., illustrates this more internal desire:

> There was this wish... to be like everybody else. (...) It wasn't like being an immigrant in another country, it was here in Israel. And here it was very important for us... grandpa especially always talks about it, um... to be like a Tsabar. Well, I couldn't be a real Tsabar, but everything I could, like in order to disguise the foreignness... be like those Tsabars who became my new friends... (H., Interview 1)

Wish to leave the past behind and form a new identity

H., in particular, offered a few comments during the interview, which show that her motivation to learn Hebrew and to make it her primary language was not merely the result of social pressure or the wish to belong, but also reflected a deeper wish to do away with the past and form a new identity. When asked about her motivation to learn and speak Hebrew upon her arrival to Israel, she said:

> It was [speaking Hebrew] like a desire, it was one of the things I wanted to accomplish. Yes, we came to Israel... and I wanted to live here... and I knew that it is important for me and that I would like to live here for all my life, and so I was very enthusiastic about learning and invested a lot, and tried to speak, with mistakes or without, just speak Hebrew. (H., Interview 1)

She further explained:

> (...) when I arrived in Israel... and could speak some Hebrew I thought that 'oh', now I can already belong, I can already leave it behind me. Because I didn't have much love for it [Slovakian] from the moment I came to Israel. (...) and that was it, this was my language. And all the other ones were... languages that belonged to my past. (H., Interview 1)

Although N. did not specifically refer to the wish to leave the past behind, his next comment can be understood as a reflection of the wish to form a new identity: "We had this pride, I had this pride at least, to be more Tsabar than the real Tsabars, so I tried to learn the language very fast." (Interview 2)

It is interesting to compare these statements to the one they made regarding their motivation to learn the English language when living in the U.S., where they spent 6 years due to N's studies. Though they did learn the language and could speak it fluently, they simply said: "English was only a means to get by there." (H., Interview 3)

Finally, to put things in a broader context, it is also important to note the role of the Israeli State in prompting those motivations in order to create a unified identity out of people coming from many lands. The interviewees themselves gave one example that highlights the kind of state interference regarding the use of language: recounting a story of Israel's then prime minister forbidding theatre performances in the Yiddish language. In this sense, their individual cases can be seen to reflect a broader desire in the newly established Israeli state and Israeli identity, to distance oneself from the diasporic identity, perceived as weak (and identified with Yiddish or other foreign languages) and to embrace the Tsabar identity, perceived as strong (and identified with Hebrew).

Taken together, these results illustrate the intricate relationships between language and identity, showing both how language is used in order to assert or establish an identity and how changes in identity prompt the learning of a language.

4   Discussion

Returning to the initial research questions, it is apparent that in the case of the interviewees, learning and speaking Hebrew when immigrating to Israel was more than a matter of getting by in a new country (as was the case with English when they moved to the U.S.). In fact, it reflected an intentional change in identity, which in turn was part of a larger scale identity shift of Jews immigrating to Israel during that time. The interviewees provided different explanations for their high motivation to learn Hebrew, ranging from their own convictions ("I knew I would want to live here all my life") to the shame of speaking another language when being among native Israelis and the wish to belong or be like the others.

While running the risk of oversimplifying the complexity of the social and ethnic situation in the then newly founded state, viewed from the perspective of social identity theory, it could be argued that when arriving in Israel, they were confronted with a new social situation which included two main groups relevant for comparison: their own in-group, comprised of immigrants from post-war Europe (Diaspora Jews), and a higher-status out-group, comprised of the Israeli born Jews (Tsabars). Seen in this light, their desire to make Hebrew their main language of communication and avoid speaking foreign languages (especially with people their age) can be interpreted as a way to dissociate themselves from their low-status in-group and join the out-group, thereby adopting a new positive identity.

While the migration story of the interviewees is a special one, coinciding with a larger scale immigration of various groups and the formation of a new national identity, some of the motivations stated above for learning the language of the host culture are also relevant for other types of migration. Wanting to 'be like everybody else' and being ashamed of one's 'otherness' can also describe the experience of a child immigrating at a young age (or being born to newly immigrated parents) and prompt his or her motivation for learning the new language, or indeed distancing itself from any notion of being different. The wish to leave the past behind can also be common to refugees in different contexts or even to other adult migrants wanting to 'start anew', strengthening their motivation to learn the new language and integrate into the new society. At the same time, the relationship between identity and language can also have the opposite effect when the wish to preserve the older identity is stronger, as can be seen in the case of migrant communities or older migrants. Thus, it could be interesting to explore in future studies the similarities and differences to the themes and motivations which emerged in these interviews with those arising in other migration contexts.

Another interesting point that came up in the interviews was the clear distinction between the places of the different languages in the interviewees' lives, especially concerning the younger and older generations. The association of the "foreign" languages (Slovakian and Hungarian) with the older generation and Hebrew with the younger one can be understood as a further support for the interpretation of an identity change, leaving the past behind (with the older generation) and embracing something new. At the same time, this is also a feature common in the case of bilingual children (for example speaking one language in the family context and another one with the peer-

group) that have not themselves experienced a major rupture in the form of migration (and hence it is not reasonable to assume a similar desire for an identity change). It could be interesting to explore in a future study how shifts in language use in such cases relate, if at all, to a perceived change of identity.

A central theme that came up in the interviews and which deserves a more thorough discussion than the scope of this paper permits, is the change in the meaning of languages over the course of life. For H., arriving in Israel as an adolescent meant that Hebrew was now her language and "all the other ones belonged to her past". It was only in old age, when "anger has lessened" and nostalgia for youth made itself apparent, that she felt a renewed need to know Slovakian. This theme could be the center of a different analysis, perhaps comparing it to other manifestations of the desire in old age to search for one's identity and roots not necessarily related to language.

Finally, it would be especially interesting to compare the findings from these interviews with those of people that had similar life stories but have chosen to preserve their old identity and language and see where the differences lie.

Compliance with ethical standards

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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