Beneath the wheel of monolingual society:

an analysis of self-identifying process in a multilingual mind

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Introduction

Conventionally, we individual human beings identify ourselves as a single idiosyncratic person respectively, but personal identity is a complex mélange of multiple factors with facet-changing nature. Aronsson & Gottzén (2011) point out, for example, that changes in social positions "provide rich sites for identifying and analyzing identity-in-interaction" (Aronsson & Gottzén, 2011, p.411). As there are no bounds to the expansion of both active and passive encounters with culturally diverse situations of "social practices" (Kubota & McKay, 2009, p.596), the multiplicity of the identity-shaping factors is continuously defined and redefined.

In scholarly studies of identity, there's a recurrent emphasis on the "dynamic" (Holmes & Marra, 2011, p.503) nature of identity-constructing process. Burkette (2013) suggests that individual speakers identify themselves within a given social context by enacting "a particular stance" (p.240) in the form of story-telling.

Yet if the stances are essentially associated with particular linguistic features, it is highly probable that multilingual individuals learn fundamentally different stance-enacting conventions of multiple groups in the process of acquiring a linguistic skill, even dialect and accent. Multilingual individuals take widely different stances in varying socio-pragmatic contexts through numerous practices of varied linguistic features, while trying to form a permanent "core" of their identities that remains consistent in whichever socio-linguistic situation. However, multilingual individuals acquire stance-enacting conventions of radically different social groups, while

monolingual individuals generally acquire the conventions of groups which share a single mutually understandable linguistic tradition. It is thus highly possible that multilingual individuals experience embarrassing confusion in enacting a particular stance more than monolinguals, knowing that the same action can be interpreted in a radically different way according to a group, situation and context. In other words, multilingual individuals are likely to be capable of traveling across a "communication gulf" (Cameron, 2007, p.1) that monolingual individuals cannot, but the capability itself creates another "gulf" between monolinguals and themselves, or even between other multilinguals.

Kanno (2003) points out the existence of varieties of "bilingualism" (Kanno, 2003, p.285) in the context of language education in Japan, which demonstrates that even in a country which has "for a long time been known as one of the prototypes of a monolingual society" (Backhaus, 2006, p.52) linguistic practices of bilinguals are radically varied. An analysis of the attitude among Japanese people toward "foreign" languages other than English by Kubota & McKay points out that even younger generation's "insufficient focuses on learning other languages" (p.614) than English signify "double monolingualism" (p.614). Yet what Kanno offers is a vivid depiction of a reality of the influence of such "double monolingualism" on linguistic minorities with a different linguistic tradition from that of the official L1(Japanese) or L2(English). In the context of "double-monolingual" social situation, linguistic minorities are sandwiched by both L1 and L2, and the struggles or even the existence of such linguistic minorities are often ignored by majority speakers of L1 and L2. Kanno's study suggests that experiences of essentially "multilingualized" linguistic minorities in a de facto monolingual society offer keys to understand the complexity of socially

situated relations between identity and language. However, the constructing process of a subjective "core" of identity of such multilingualized individuals is yet to be investigated, for in scholarly studies the emphasis is on more dynamic parts of identity. Yet the significance of relatively static, less changeable part of identity is undeniable despite the dynamic nature of identity, for both existence and absence of firm core identity, however imaginary it may be, seems to make an obvious difference in the feasibility of constructing a consistent identity as a member of a particular group between monolinguals and multilinguals. In this paper I analyze interviews with a multilingual individual who lives in Cyprus as a linguistic minority, while been exposed to more than three languages and concurrently to multicultural practices from early childhood, in order to find out the process of constructing the "core" of identity, being a multilingual as she is.

Methods

In order to look into the issue of a core of multilingual identity, I designed a narrowly focused analysis in which I applied an "inductive" approach (Thomas, 2006, p.246), following a "tradition" of qualitative research (Morita, 2004, p.578). My focus is on the micro-level personal experiences, since I find significance in "personal stories" (Kinginger, 2004, p.220), and it is fruitful to look into "the micro-level" in order to "gain understanding of larger social structures" (Cook, 2009, p.170).

I collected data in face-to-face interview conversation through online video-conferences and written chats. Since the subject of this paper is a highly personal matter as identity, I found it appropriate to make use of online communication, for it is a tool to "allow marginalized voices to share space" (Kolko & Wei, 2005, p.206). The

interviewee is a multilingual named Leila (pseudonym), currently living in Cyprus, where the most common spoken language (L1 for majority) is Turkish. Leila was born in Morocco, and raised as a Moroccan Sunni Muslim. She learned English and French in school, but the emphasis was more on French, as traditionally more people in Morocco understand French than English, and it is self-evident for her that she acquired a command of English rather through the exposure to English-speaking media and pop culture. Leila identifies herself as an English speaker because she is proud of the efforts she spontaneously made for English acquisition, and currently Leila is studying in English in an undergraduate course in a private university in Cyprus, which is one of the few universities in the Muslim community that has a faculty of specialized architecture. Her dream is to be an architect and earn a sufficient amount of salary to retain independence in global market, and her focus is on international community than on local community.

I analyze the voices by Leila in the interviews inductively, in order to retain the fruitful complexity in issues concerning personal identity intact. In the process of analysis I aim for "fresh perspectives" (Gorter, 2013, p.205), and since there is always a danger of "minority signification" (Yamamoto, 2012, p.154) in any kind of discourse about minorities, including academic paper, I heed to refrain from any "discursive" (Augoustinos & Every, 2007, p.133) statement that allows biased interpretations, keeping in mind that "all academic work is socially situated" (Spack, 1997, p.50).

Findings

In general, the voices of Leila demonstrate that her lifestyle of speaking four languages (i.e. English, French, Moroccan Arabic and Turkish) on daily basis causes

multiplicity in the core of her identity. While the multiplicity led Leila to find difficulty in defining her identity in a simple word even tentatively, it didn't generate serious discrepancy in Leila's identity-constructing process. In fact, a sense of integrity in her identity was clearly found in Leila's voices despite the complexity that entails the multiplicity. Leila insisted on identifying herself as a Sunni Muslim, though her emphasis on the uniqueness of her personal character as a crucial factor of identity is also visibly strong. Leila expressed resentment toward those who "judge" her by one category, and she intentionally ignores what she feels as biased views and opinions about her identity held by others. Leila didn't hesitate, however, to show reverence for Classical Arabic, in which the Islamic Holy Scripture is written. Classical Arabic, in Leila's words, "pure" or "good" Arabic, offers Leila a sense of belonging to an ideal Muslim community, to which only "good" Muslims are associated. For clarity, further details of each notable finding are expanded separately below.

First language & Mother tongue

While both of Leila's parents dominantly speak Moroccan Arabic and communicate with each other in Moroccan Arabic, the language Leila dominantly speaks is English, because Leila firmly stated that it's the language she feels the most comfortable, even though she usually communicates with her parents in Moroccan. English makes her feel "more comfortable" and it enables her to "express thoughts more easily". For Leila, the language her mother speaks is not the language she primarily speaks and feels the most comfortable with, which questions the monolingual assumption that "mother tongue" is equal to "first language". Plus, Leila's ability to switch language strategically according to the situation reveals a process in which a multilingual individual intentionally

positions herself apart from negative aspects, of which some of the languages she speaks are determined to carry in a particular situation, by continuously switching the language according to social situations she finds herself involved. Whilst it is possible to deem this ability a "privilege" (Kanno, 2003, p.288) of multilinguals, it somehow leads to a sense of split-identity:

> "I feel more comfortable with English because I feel I can express my thoughts more easily. You know, I only express my real feelings in English ever since I was a little girl. I never expressed my thoughts in Moroccan because when I speak in Moroccan I become a kind of person who hides stuff. I used to write down my true inner voices in English, and in Moroccan I just say what I'm expected to say." (Leila, online-communication interview, 14th November 2014, original in English)

Clearly Leila is aware that her mind distinguishes the role of languages she speaks, and while English is associated with her "true inner voices", Moroccan Arabic is associated with what she thinks her parents (and possibly the Moroccan local society as well) expect of her. English is, for Leila, a tool to give a way out to emotional feelings suppressed within the context of "Moroccan" life, while Moroccan Arabic is a barrier with which to present herself as a good Moroccan when she feels the need to. It then seems that English is playing a more significant role in Leila's self-identifying process, for it is associated with her "true inner voices". However, other voices of Leila demonstrate that the "true inner voices" expressed in English cannot hold a position as the very core of Leila's identity, because for Leila, her identity as a "Muslim" is the most indispensable.

Religion & Personality as core factors of identity

Leila firmly asserted that retention of her identity as a Muslim is one of the crucially important "duties" in her life. However, there's another complexity of the discord between her pride as a Muslim and her resentment toward the "misunderstanding" of "Islam" both by the Muslim terrorists and by the western media, which facilitates the formation of negative stereotypes of Islamic faith:

> "I'm proud of being a Muslim, and my religion is an important part of my identity. I know some people say really bad things about Islam, but it's not like what they say. To me, Islam is a good religion that teaches us very basic morality – be good to others and respect God – that's all. Things like terrorism is not the Islam I know." (Leila, online-communication interview, 14th November 2014, original in English)

What Leila defines as "basic morality" here is another source of complexity because it involves not just the morality in "Moroccan lifestyle", but it also involves what she personally thinks is "true" Islamic morality, which is undoubtedly based on her interpretations of the traditional Islamic faith, and yet simultaneously influenced more or less by western values conveyed through English speaking media. For Leila intentionally presents the "true Muslim morality" as a set of tradition that does not challenge the values in western traditions, which suggests that her "true Muslim" identity is constructed in a way that it doesn't make conflicts with "western" values expressed in English media, and in this sense her multilingual ability has influence on her religious identity.

Nevertheless, Leila has a strong sense of individual personality behind her emphasis on the importance of being a Muslim, and she is firmly determined to "fight" independently for what she believes in. She even rejected to explicitly identify herself with any language she speaks:

> "My personality doesn't change according to the language I speak. Words I say change, and ranges of what I can express change, but my personality doesn't. I'm just a girl who fights for what she believes in, even if she stands alone for it." (Leila, online-communication interview, 1st November 2014, original in English)

What Leila says here seems somehow inconsistent with what she said about the way she distinguishes English and Moroccan Arabic (p.5-6), but in Leila's view, there is a core unchanging identity that she conceives as "personality", and she distinguishes "personality" from the way she acts practically in social contexts. This suggests that Leila is not willing to identify herself with what she appears to be in social contexts, and that she believes there is an unchanging essence that defines the core of her "personality" which is supposed to be stably solid.

Influence of Inter-subjective views on self-identifying process

Although Leila stated that she usually speaks and thinks more in English than in Moroccan Arabic language, in Cyprus she was not free from "sociopragmatic challenges" that "newcomers in any environment face" (Holmes & Marra, 2011, p.530). There were some occasions in which Leila felt herself to be an excluded outsider in Cyprus, because others judged her by her looks, lifestyle and the language she spoke:

> "I consider myself as a Moroccan because although I live in Cyprus I still keep my origin which I'm proud of, like my traditions, food, and the lifestyle. There are things I like in Cyprus and I'm getting more and more accustomed to life here in Cyprus, but wherever you go, you will always be considered as an emigrant. They just judge you based on your nationality." (Leila, online-communication interview, 29th October 2014, original in English)

Leila explicitly demonstrates her pride in her identity as a "Moroccan" here, which stands in contrast to what she said about Moroccan Arabic language in comparison to English (p.5), suggesting that in the social context where the difference between Moroccan lifestyle and the lifestyle of other culture is sharply recognized Leila does identify herself as a "Moroccan", regardless of the language she uses in that context. However, it is also possible to point out some resentment of being viewed as "Moroccan" in this Leila's voice, which corresponds with her emphasis on the idiosyncratic nature of her "personality."(p.7)

Language with a religious value & identity

As in the former sections above, Leila makes a distinction between her "personality" and the linguistic features through which she positions herself in various socio-pragmatic contexts. It doesn't mean, however, that any kind of language cannot be conceived as a tool for constructing the core of her identity. In fact, she does express reverence for what she calls "pure" or "good" Arabic:

> "I read Quran in real pure Arabic. It's God's divine words and so it was in real Arabic, and people translated it in other languages so that they can understand it. But normally the real source is in Arabic, good Arabic. When I was young I didn't understand Quran very much, but now I do. They teach us the real Arabic in school, so I have no trouble in reading the Quran in the pure Arabic." (Leila, online-communication interview, 1st November 2014, original in English)

Holy Arabic is, however, not conceived as a language for daily communicative use here. It is a language used in religious contexts, and although Leila reports that she learned the Holy Arabic in school, just as other secular languages like English and

French, the limitation of the contexts in which the language is used distinguishes Holy Arabic from other languages. What Leila associates the holy Arabic with is, therefore, a more complex "imagined" (Kanno, 2003, p.287) community than other imagined communities associated with spoken languages used on daily basis within groups, for it is essentially a religious community in which the holy Scripture holds supreme authority, and the limitation of the use of the language to religious contexts alone specifies the role that the language plays in identity-constructing process.

Discussions

Leila's voices clearly reveal the complexity of the core of her identity multiplied by the multilingual environment she lives in. Leila reported the relatively stronger influence of English on her self-identification process, but her emphasis on the indispensability of her identity as a Muslim (p.6) seems to suggest the idiosyncratic significance of religious identity, especially in a multilingual context where diversity of culture and languages continuously questions any stabilized "core" identity. The split of the attitude in Leila's mind toward "Moroccan" lifestyle (p.8) and the inability to express her "true inner voices" in Moroccan Arabic language at ease (p.5) explicitly demonstrates the multiplicity even of inner language in self-meditative contexts.

As to the religious identity as a Muslim, Leila insisted on the necessity of reading the holy Scripture in classical Arabic, and it is conceived by Leila as less desirable to be satisfied with the translated versions of the texts in vulgar Arabic, let alone those in foreign languages. This may imply that a distinction of a "holy" language from other "secular" languages is a significant part of faith. In other words, the choice of which language to consider as "holy" is likely to reveal a religious identity of an individual,

while a “holy” language influences directly the core of identity of an individual and strengthen the faith as well. In Leila’s case, she recognized classical Arabic to be the holy language, and the religious texts written in classical Arabic had direct influence on her identity. It is no less notable, however, that Leila’s exposure to various kinds of culturally and linguistically diverse worlds, in some of which a variety of conflicting values with her faith are held, indirectly shaped Leila’s view of what an ideal Muslim community should be.

Leila’s voices reveal a facet of a reality of 21st century where multilingual youth exposed to the multicultural world are struggling for a firm core identity in spite of the impossibility of integrating themselves in a traditional community, while trying to enter already-existing wider global communities and simultaneously to construct a new, more general core identity as a member of a better global community.

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