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## DAUGIAKALBYSTĖ: KALBA IR KULTŪRINĖ TAPATYBĖ

The Multilingualism: Language and Cultural Identity

### SUMMARY

The article considers the relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity. The focus is on the social status of spoken languages and cultural identity. Cultural identity is looked upon as a complex notion which encompasses a collective memory of one's family, community, nation, country, ancestral history, etc. It refers to customs, traditions, beliefs, values that construct a person's sense of belonging. The relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity is not straightforward since cultures are not static. They change over time due to factors such as globalization, migration, technological advancements, etc. Languages are also not static. They undergo changes since people adapt the language, they speak to match the changing reality. The article describes the ways, how the relationship between language and cultural identity gives expression to positive and negative characteristics. The article also considers cultural identity in partnership with the mother tongue of an individual. The example from the discussion where international students at the university talk about their cultural identity and the mother tongue is provided.

### SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas daugiakalbystės ir kultūrinės tapatybės ryšys. Skiriama dėmesio socialinei šnekamosios kalbos aplinkai ir kultūrinei tapatybei. „Kultūrinė tapatybė“ – sudėtinga sąvoka. Ji siejama su kolektyvine šeimos, bendruomenės, tautos, šalies, protėvių ir pan. atmintimi. Kultūrinė tapatybė yra veikiamą papročių, tradicijų, įsitikinimų, vertybių, kuriančių asmens priklausomybės jausmą. Ryšys tarp daugiakalbystės ir kultūrinės tapatybės nėra tiesioginis, nes kultūros nėra statiškos. Laikui bėgant, jos kinta, darant įtaką tokiems veiksniams kaip globalizacija, migracija, technologijų pažanga ir kt. Kalbos taip pat nėra statiškos. Jos keičiasi, nes žmonės pritaiko kalbą, kuria kalba, stengdamiesi, kad ji atitiktų besikeičiančią tikrovę. Straipsnyje aprašoma, kaip kalbos ir kultūrinės tapatybės ryšys įgauna teigiamų bei neigiamų bruožų. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariama kultūrinė tapatybė, reginti santykį su asmens gimtąja kalba. Pateikiamas pavyzdys iš diskusijos, kurioje užsienio studentai universitete kalba apie savo kultūrinį tapatumą ir gimtąją kalbą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: daugiakalbystė, kultūrinė tapatybė, kultūrų įvairovė, gimtoji kalba.

KEY WORDS: multilingualism, cultural identity, cultural diversity, mother tongue.

## INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is frequently related to globalization which is generally understood as openness that actualizes itself through various relationships occurring in a variety of areas. These relationships cover open flow of information, technology and innovation, exchange in goods and products, easier access to talents and new cultures, education, travelling, etc. The experience of multilingualism can be different across cultures. It may be voiced as the wish which communicates a total support to becoming a multilingual and gaining a gateway to the global world. It may also take the opposite trend and show a total disregard to other languages and cultures. However, today the tendency which recognizes that there are more advantages than disadvantages in becoming a multilingual person is being advocated by the larger society.

Multilingualism has received major scholarly attention and is defined by most of researchers as the ability of an individual to speak at least two languages (Edwards 2013; Clyne 2017). Multilingualism can acquire different dimensions from the age of acquisition the second-third-etc. language and second-third-etc. language proficiency, to the use of spoken languages in the community, the social status of spoken languages and cultural identity, development of cognition, etc.

With respect to the age of acquisition language researchers distinguish two groups of language learners. The first group includes multilinguals who learn more than one language from birth. They are called simultaneous multilinguals (Ramirez-Esparza and Garcia-Sierra 2014). We frequently witness the situation of simultaneous multilinguals when a child's parents speak a different language than the official language of the country, they live in. Then the children are exposed to two different languages from their birth. It is not uncommon when parents are of different nationalities and speak different languages. Then their children often speak two different languages at home, and a third language at an educational institution. The second group covers second language learners who learn a second language after their mother tongue has been set up. They learn the second language, for example, at school, special courses or in the community that they had to move into.

In the world which has become increasingly interconnected the proficiency in several languages goes beyond just practical application of communication skills. It is a bridge that connects people to their heritage, stimulates international understanding, shapes one's sense of self.

## MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural identity is a typical feature that is attributed to language and hence multilingualism. It is a versatile construct that incorporates customs, traditions, beliefs, values that construct a

person's sense of belonging. However, culture is not solely determined by a person's native language or nationality. According to researchers the language we speak influences our realities, but

even people who speak the same language experience cultural differences because of their various intersecting cultural identities and personal experiences (Crystal 2005: 155).

The notion of identity is a composite one. Researchers notice that we can speak about social identity, gender identity, cultural identity, religious identity, national identity, and many other identities (Rovira 66). Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity. The shared values, customs, understanding have a very strong influence on how a person behaves, thinks, and views the world. Language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. Language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is the means by which we convey our innermost self from generation to generation. It is through language that we transmit and express our culture and its values. (ibid, 66)

Speaking one's native language does not only mean that a tool for communication is used. It also means that one is connected to collective memory of one's family, community, nation, country, ancestral history, etc. Multilingualism strengthens that connection making people involve themselves with their social and cultural matters on a deeper level.

However, linking multilingualism and cultural identity is not straightforward. The relationship between the two is very complex since it involves complex and changing interactions between language, culture and individual. People often associate their native language with their roots and identity. Therefore, some individuals may feel torn between different languages and this sense of duality can evoke questions of authenticity and belonging. Cultures are not static.

They change over time due to factors such as globalization, migration, technological advancements, etc. Languages spoken within these cultures also change since people adapt the language, they speak to match the changing reality. In multicultural societies where there are a lot of people with diverse cultural backgrounds, people often have hybrid cultural identities that absorb elements from multiple cultures and languages. Multilingual people, therefore, may feel a strong connection to more than one cultural identity. Cultural identity can vary from person to person since people have individual experiences and backgrounds. Some people may strongly label themselves to their mother tongue, while others may focus on career perspectives and put priority to the working language within the community.

Culturally influenced differences in language and meaning can lead to some unexpected situations, from awkward to disastrous. In terms of awkwardness, there are stories about companies that failed in their advertising campaigns because of wrong translations that came from poor communication. For example, in Lithuania the company "Electrolux" was promoting washing machines and posted a promotional message in Lithuanian which read: *Elektrolux – par excel-lence!* The word *par excellence* was translated into Lithuanian as *nėra lygių* (*not straight*) which implied that all washing machines were skewed. Another example refers to the company American Motors which introduced a new car called the Matador to the Puerto Rico market only to learn that *Matador* means "killer," which wasn't very comforting to potential buyers (Time 1970). In terms of disastrous

consequences, one of the most publicized and deadliest cross-cultural business mistakes occurred in India in 1984. Union Carbide, an American company, controlled a plant used to make pesticides. The company underestimated the amount of cross-cultural training that would be needed to allow the local workers, many

of whom were not familiar with the technology or language/jargon used in the instructions for plant operations to do their jobs. This lack of competent communication led to a gas leak that immediately killed more than two thousand people and over time led to more than five hundred thousand injuries (Varma 2012).

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The overview of the research literature in the relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity has shown that researchers identify several ways which manifest that the link between the two is not only complex but also very solid. The distinguished processes include:

**CULTURAL CONNECTION AND PRESERVATION.** Multilinguals can communicate with their family and community members in their native language. This promotes their engagement more deeply with cultural traditions, values, heritage, etc. Multilinguals can also serve as a tool for preserving endangered languages and culture practices that may be undergoing the process of extinction since language is a carrier of cultural knowledge and history. Researchers mention that efforts to appreciate and foster human differences require awareness of the importance of multilingualism (Bianco 2010).

**CULTURAL FLEXIBILITY.** Multilinguals may be more adaptable to different cultural contexts due to their proficiency in several languages and contacts with different environments. This adaptability can shape their understanding of cultural varieties and facilitate cross-cultur-

al communication. Multilingual students, as suggested by researcher B. Benzehaf, “are defining and redefining their cultural identities as modern, global, open and intercultural citizens under the impact of multilingualism” (Benzehaf 2021).

**EMPATHY AND RESPECT.** Multilingualism often stimulates empathy and respect for other cultures. The knowledge of different cultural backgrounds and ability to switch between the languages they speak, may help them fit the social-cultural context and express their feelings. Researchers assume that having knowledge of other languages and, implicitly, of cultures, can help increase awareness and empathy with other cultural values and mindsets. Therefore, it is easier and faster for multilinguals to adapt to the ways and values of other cultures (Drobot 2021).

**PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.** Multilingualism can help to take advantage of career growth in a globalized job market. While maintaining ties with their cultural background multilinguals can contribute to a global international community. It is commonly agreed that the clearest advantage of multilingualism with adults is in the realm of employment.

Every language a person speaks is key to unlocking more professional opportunities. Companies want multilingual staff because they improve the chances for success in the global market as languages give the speaker an understanding and insight into cultural diversities.

**CULTURAL ENRICHMENT.** Multilingualism can enrich one's intellectual and emotional mind as languages widen the exposure to different cultural contexts. This can lead to greater appreciation of cultural diversity and to feeling more connected to the global world.

The above-mentioned aspects which illustrate the mutual relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity encompass positive characteristics. However, the overview of the research literature has revealed that there are negative aspects to this relationship. Some of them include:

**IDENTITY CONFLICT AND FUSION.** Sometimes individuals can feel pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture. Such situation can lead to identity conflict. However, it can also result in cultural fusion when individuals mentally absorb elements from different cultures. This blending fosters the creation of their own cultural identity which comprises elements from different cultures. Researchers also point out that identity conflicts in multilinguals may not be inherently negative. They can be part of a natural process of self-discovery and adaptation to community life. Supportive environments can help individuals navigate these conflicts and develop a holistic sense of identity (Razmeh 2017).

**PRESSURE TO CONFORM.** Multilinguals might face pressure to conform to the cultural norms of the communities as-

sociated with the languages they speak. This pressure could come from friends, family members or society and it may lead to the adjustment to the norms that are different from the original cultural identity and therefore to the loss of authenticity in cultural identity. Besides, social pressure, discrimination and forceful policies related to language use can negatively influence individuals and communities and establish resistance towards linguistic practice.

**IDENTITY CRISIS.** If multilingualism results in a strong attachment to one language over the other, individuals may have doubts about their true cultural identity. They may have concerns about whether they are betraying their roots or that they are undermining their connection to the culture they are from. There are stories when people say that they forgot their native language because they wanted to assimilate to a new environment. This forgetting often means that a person has lost one's roots. This loss of language, which inevitably leads to loss of cultural identity, carries with it many dangerous implications. According to Joshua Fishman, when we take away the language of a culture we take away, "its greetings, its curses, its cures, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its rhymes, its proverbs, its wisdom, and its prayers" (Fishman 448).

**STEREOTYPING AND PREJUDICE.** Multilingual people may be stereotyped or prejudiced because of their language skills. They may be perceived as foreign or different, which can lead to feelings of isolation or discrimination and affect their sense of cultural identity.

**DECLINE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY.** Some researchers foresee the decline in cul-

tural diversity with the increase of globalization. Cultural diversity for them is closely related to diversity of languages and the transfer the native language to a different language that is used in the community in their opinion can cause the reduced importance of the native language (Pupavac 2012)

It is important to understand that these potential negative aspects are not inherent to being multilingual. They result from the complex interaction between language, cultural identity and personal experience. These challenges are not universal and may vary depending on one's experiences and situations.

## TCKS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE MOTHER TONGUE

Cultural identity issue and the identification of the mother tongue of an individual have become a commonality in life and manifest themselves on various levels and in a variety of forms. With fundamental changes in political, economic, social and cultural life individuals in societies undergo a process of reorientation and adaptation to new living conditions, including the transformation of values and related changes in attitudes, lifestyles, norms of behavior and behavior itself. Influenced by these factors, the system of national identity is also transforming. This transformation also remodels the understanding of the mother tongue concept and cultural identification to the mother tongue language.

Considering this point of view, a discussion was held with international students of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University „VilniusTech“ in 2022. The discussion focused on the issue of cultural identity. The international students

The influence of multilingualism on cultural identity is highly individual and can vary based on several factors, including the proficiency level of the language, the social environment, personal experiences, and the cultural significance of the languages in question. Individuals who are multilingual may feel as though their linguistic and cultural identities are integrated effortlessly, whereas others may struggle with emotions of ambiguity or conflict. The impact of bilingualism on cultural identity is a dynamic process that changes over time and is influenced by different internal and external factors.

who during the discussion labelled themselves as *Third-culture kids* (TCKs) expressed how they perceive the notion of *cultural identity*, talked about their cultural identity, described the similarities with other people and differences from them that they see and argued on the question of mother tongue.

When requested to give a definition in their understanding of the term „*Third-culture kids*“, they pointed out that TCKs for them are people who have more than one home. Two or more cultures clash in TCKs. It can be someone who was born in one country but lives in another one. It can also be a person whose parents are of different nationalities or it can be a person who was born and was raised in one culture but ethnically belongs to a different culture.

One of the questions that the students who participated in the discussion attempted to answer sounded like this: „*Where are you from and what is your*

*mother tongue?*” TCKs said that they have more than one answer to this questions. Let’s refer to some examples where TCKs speak about their nationality and their origin. The following is the excerpt from the discussion with the students.

Q.: What’s your nationality?

A.: That’s a tough question. My passport says that I am Jordanian, but my origin is Palestinian. My dad is Jordanian-Palestinian and my mom is also Jordanian-Palestinian. I was born and raised in Qatar.

Q.: How many languages do you speak?

A.: I speak two languages fluently – arabic which is my mother tongue and English.

Q.: What does cultural identity mean to you?

A.: Cultural identity for me is something that is never changing and that represents me as a person. For me identity represents who you are. It consists of your culture, your values. For me this is very important. I make sure that I do not lose my sense of identity. And this may happen among new surrounding. I make sure that I maintain consciousness regarding what my identity is.

Q.: Where is your home?

A.: Home for me is a place where I feel a sense of comfort. And this is not related to physical comfort, this is what we call mental comfort, emotional comfort. I was born and raised in Qatar, so a hundred percent Qatar is home. When speaking about Jordan I have visited it about ten times, but when I go there I feel comfort from my extended family. They treat me like I am incredible. And this is why I tell you that for me home is where I feel comfort.

Q.: What is the most interesting thing about your TCK cultural identity?

A.: The biggest pro is adaptability. The biggest con is dealing constantly with identity crises.

This is just one example from the mentioned discussion. And it illustrates the view that was very similar to the understanding of cultural identity and mother tongue expressed by other international students. Students who participated in the discussion mentioned that being a TCK for them can have both advantages and disadvantages and the first outweigh the second. They believe that TCKs tend to build relationships with other cultures easier since they do not carry a strict affiliation to some concrete cultural identity. They often have cross-cultural competence and they can effectively function in different cultural backgrounds. They are happy that they can speak several languages. They describe themselves as open-minded, embracing differences and the otherness of other people. They find it easier to adapt to new environment as they have already experienced this reality and not once. Among disadvantages they point out that getting adapted, can be a challenge. TCKs may move to another country with a completely different culture and ethnical background. Above all, they point out that there are cases when TCKs experience the absence of the sense of belonging to a culture when a person, as they describe, has more than one culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

Language is a pivotal component of cultural identity, as it carries the nuances

of history, emotion, and communal wisdom that tie individuals to their roots.

The link between multilingualism and cultural identity is complex and many-sided. It is influenced by historical, social, and personal causes and is not a straightforward connection.

Both positive and negative aspects come up when the relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity is discussed.

TCKs are willing to build relationships with other cultures since they do not carry a strict affiliation to some concrete cultural identity. They often have cross-cultural competence and they can effectively function in different cultural backgrounds.

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