

Language Competence as a Factor of Shaping Human Identity



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ABSTRACT: If we take a deep look at the analysis of the word “competence” in the term of language competence, we will see that this concept has certain foundations outside of linguistics. This word plays an important role in all fields related to professional life, such as sociology, pedagogy, psychology and even personnel management. A competency is a consciously controlled set of abilities or skills in a specific domain. Competence also requires knowledge as well as the ability to solve problems in the field. The relevant fields are often the professional fields that people master. It is an undeniable fact that competence is acquired through training and experience and is measured according to established standards.

If we look at the science of psychology, we will see that there are “personal” and “professional” types of competence. Since our goal is to examine the term “competence” from the linguistic aspect, we can say that a person’s language competence is, first of all, a part of its personality. On the other hand, this is one of the most important factors that shape professional life. So what do we mean by language competence? Thus, the language knowledge and skills necessary for the language to realize itself in speech activity are called language competence. It is possible to call “language competence” the ability of a language user to both express himself/herself and understand the other party correctly while using the language. It is an accepted reality that language is universal, that is, it is related to the expressive ability of a person, related to thought, words and gestures, attitude and hidden beliefs, cultural creation. On the other hand, language is a cultural object that is related to specific or historical conditions, in other words, it is built in conditions of participation and cooperation with all individuals of society.

KEYWORDS: language, identity, competence, human, acquisition, linguistic

INTRODUCTION

The word *competence* is of Persian origin and means to be able to do something, experience or skill. N. Chomsky calls the language knowledge of the language user “linguistic competence”. The translation of this concept as a term into the Azerbaijani language is expressed in different words. The most accepted translation of these is the term “language competence” by F. Y. Veysalli. N. Chomsky meant more grammatical competence when he said language competence. For this reason, language competence is presented under the name of grammatical competence in some sources. According to N. Chomsky, language competence includes all the linguistic knowledge that a language user involuntarily knows in order to use a certain language and understands that language. He believes that language competence cannot be evaluated as a measurement criterion because it includes the language knowledge and habits that are already inside us. An example of this is the sentence mentioned by linguists such as Eva M. Fernandez and Helen Smith Cairns (2011), followers of N. Chomsky, in their book “Fundamentals of Psycholinguistics”. The language user can easily feel that the grammatical norm is violated in the sentence “John said that Jane helped himself”. The reason for this is actually not what the speaker of the language learns from grammar books, but the linguistic knowledge he/she involuntarily knows based on internal language competence [Chomsky 1965, p. 29]. A detailed explanation of the term competence and its relation to issues of identity and culture will be reflected in the following paragraphs. “In the early years of history, there was a word. And the word was compared to a spirit. The status of the word is currently the same as before. The word includes the soul, that is, people’s history, culture, traditions and the most natural way of life. Language is human. Just as we cannot imagine a person without a language, it is also impossible to imagine a language without a person. Both are one unit and the same. To know one is to know the otherone.” This excerpt from Sabine Ulibarri’s speech coincides with the main theme of the second section of the research paper. In order to present the relationship between language competence and identity, the concept of identity must first be considered. As a result of a web search within the Encyclopaedia Britannica web page, we can say that the concept of Personality exists in many fields of modern science, such as mathematics (identity matrix), philosophy (identity theory), theology (Christian identity), psychology (dissociative personality disorder). Similarly, D. Block [Block 2002, p. 43] claims that the concept of identity cannot belong to a single field and lists some different types of identity. Scholars studying the history of identity (eg, Benwell, Stokoe, Taylor, Holstein, Hall) find it useful to go back to the Western European Enlightenment to find the roots of current interests in identity. Well-known scientists such as Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel, who have studied human existence and its identity for a

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long time, continue to be relevant in the literature list of many scientific research works on the topic of identity. One factor that encouraged a deeper understanding of the concept of “identity” was the emergence and development of psychology as a science starting from the end of the 19th century. On the one hand, William James, in his classic two-volume work, *Principles of Psychology*, defined identity as “substance” (attitudes toward one’s body, attachment to objects and objects, and feelings formed in relation to them) as “social” (one’s interactions with others and spiritual intellectual activity and the inner essence of morality) has conducted extensive research. One factor that encouraged a deeper understanding of the concept of “identity” was the emergence and development of psychology as a science starting from the end of the 19th century. On the one hand, William James, in his classic two-volume work, *Principles of Psychology*, defined identity as “substance” (attitudes toward one’s body, attachment to objects and objects, and feelings formed in relation to them) as “social” (one’s interactions with others and spiritual intellectual activity and the inner essence of morality) has conducted extensive research. On the other hand, Sigmund Freud’s definition of “Ego” and “Identity” claims that the ego is the unconscious inner world of passion and instinct, and that the ego originates from the identity, but is its social expression. What is identity? Identity is an image of ourselves in various social situations. It goes without saying that both verbal and non-verbal language is the main feature that distinguishes humans from other living beings. From another perspective, language is communication, and communication cannot be studied in isolation. Communication should be analyzed within the framework of its impact on people and their lives. Thus, the role of language in the formation of a person as an identity is irreplaceable.

DISCUSSION

This section attempts to present contemporary approaches to describing the concept of identity and its relationship to language use. Language and identity are the most important elements that complete a person's self as an individual. Language and identity are at the top of the characteristic features that make a person different from others, from the moment he opens his eyes to the world. It is thanks to these characteristics that form identity values and that a person gains a certain role in the society he lives in. These two concepts, which manifest the existence of a person in society and accept him as “himself” by everyone, have been values that constantly shape each other and influence each other throughout history.

A. Dieckhoff proposed that language has two main functions [Dieckhoff 2004, p.190]. First, of course, language is a means of communication between people. The second function is that it is the main feature that shows the identity of a person and distinguishes him/her from other people. A common language, as an ideal means of expressing any social group or society, has the ability to strengthen social relations in the formation of a common identity. Language is also an important indicator of social identity and includes the ability to unite and separate social groups consisting of different nations, religions, classes, etc. It is no coincidence that the concepts of language and identity and the close relationship between them constitute the main subject of socio-linguistics [Chomsky 2009, p. 87].

The concepts of language and identity, which are the subject of research in many fields of science, have always been in the center of attention and various explanations have been given from different perspectives. In this position, the thoughts and researches of the German scientist Wilhelm von Humboldt brought a new perspective on the relationship between language and identity. One of the leading philosophers of the 19th century, Humboldt, in his book "The Heterogeneity of Language and its Influence on the Intellectual Development of Mankind", which talks about the relationship between language and nation, devoted space to his researches on the problem of national identity and language. *“Language is not a finished work or event (ergon), but an activity (energeia),”* Humboldt said with this sentence, bringing a new perspective to modern language, culture and identity studies. *Language does not have a fixed, unchanging, stagnant quality. On the contrary, it changes and develops over time depending on historical, social and cultural factors and is constantly in motion. If language were an "ergon", it would be possible for it not to change and remain as it is once formed. However, language has the power to change and evolve. According to Humboldt, one of the reasons for these changes and developments flowing throughout history is the society and language carriers that existed at that time.*

Before talking about the influence of the concepts of language competence and identity on each other, as we mentioned, it would be more appropriate to find answers to the questions of what is identity and where does this term come from. The history of the “identity” concept, which currently stands at the center of social and humanitarian sciences, has been investigated by many scientists [Ibrahimova 2017]. In order to explore the history of the prominence of identity in this form in the present era, scholars turn to the literature of the Western European Renaissance, referring to philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel. Also, M. F. Bendle notes that the interest in the concept of identity dates back a century and a half, that is, in the middle of the 19th century, when the human personality came to the fore as a result of the separation of religion from the state [Bendle 2002, p.17]. Scientists such as Karl Marx and Emily Durkheim note that due to the development of industry during that period, living standards rose and human position came to the fore. The trend that arose during the mentioned period helped to devote a lot of space to the individual development of a person and the study of identity as a concept, considering human life as more valuable.

Although the close relationship between language, identity and also culture has been of constant interest throughout the history of linguistics, researches in this area have not been carried out enough. When talking about the influence of language on

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human identity, in many cases, culture is taken as a component of language. H. Trueba and Y. Zou suggested that without language, culture cannot be fully mastered, nor can it be expressed effectively, nor can it be transmitted from generation to generation, and language cannot exist without culture. Human language and culture are connected to each other in such a way that it is difficult to make an opinion about the parameters of both or about the power of influence [Chomsky 2009, p.57]. For this reason, many scholars, along with the mentioned scholars, have generally accepted that culture is a broader concept and language is a component of it. It is not accidental that in the early years of socialism, the system of linguistic and cultural symbols that a person accumulates in himself was of great importance in his socialization as an individual, in the formation of his cognition and character.

As mentioned earlier, in order to analyze the interaction between language and identity, definitions and explanations covering the main characteristics of these two concepts must first be explored. There are different definitions given by different linguists, and even if additions or deductions are made to them, the goal will remain the same to highlight the main trends of the relationship between these two global concepts.

People communicate with each other using the language of the society or social group in which they live. These social groups can be small groups of fewer individuals (e.g. couples using certain words whose meanings are known only to members of that group, sisters, mothers and children, friends, etc.) or large social groups such as a nation that speaks the same language. Large social groups usually communicate in the same language and share history, culture, and social events in that language. The language they prefer to use is often the language that is close to their moral values or has anything to do with them. There are enough examples in history to prove this: King William the Conqueror of France gave his speech at the coronation ceremony in Britain in French rather than English. The Norman French of England began to speak a Normanized version of English to distinguish themselves from the French of Paris during the Hundred Years War between France and England. The special language of small groups and the common language of large social groups are two different versions of the same language. Regardless of the number of individuals, each social group has its own language form, such as a regional language, dialects, or minority language groups, which influence the identity development of the people in that group. However, it should be noted that usually all these forms of language use overlap and unite people under the same name, for example, American, Spanish, European, etc.

In 2006, Michael Byram introduced the basic principles of language competence and identity concepts. According to him, a person cannot develop himself separately from the society or social group in which he lives. A person can define himself as an individual only if he belongs to any group. So, a person distinguishes himself from other people by joining a certain social group. In other words, by belonging to social group 'X', a person differentiates himself from those belonging to social group 'Y'. The identity included in any social group earns itself the name of social identity status [Byram 2006, p.15].

M. Byram also notes that social identities manifest themselves in different forms in different social situations [Byram 2006, p. 16]. For example, if a girl carries the identity of a girl in the family social group, she is a student in the school social group. A person's different social identities lead him to use different forms of language in different social groups. Of course, since social identity belongs to different social groups, it is a normal phenomenon for language competence to change into appropriate forms. A social identity cannot acquire competent speech if the language it uses is not relevant to the social group in which it exists. Using appropriate language in a social group makes it clear that the social identity is a member of that group. Willingly or involuntarily, social identities do not sympathize with identities that use a different form of language in their social group. Today, in many parts of the world, people adopt English as an official or second language for economic reasons. It is well known that choosing not to speak the "native" language can be perceived as a betrayal of one's cultural heritage and national identity. Each language gives us the key to a completely different and unique world. A few years ago, Malaysia had to change its direction regarding the teaching of English in schools. Due to the pressure of the Malay nationalists, who were worried about the position of the national language being in danger, "Bahasa Melayu" language was started to be used as the teaching language of science and mathematics.

Another proposition put forward by the same linguist is related to how identities acquire the languages of these social groups. He notes that this process is reflected in a natural and involuntary form. Newborn children involuntarily acquire the languages of their social group, and this phenomenon continues at the same pace in different social groups in later years. The involuntary acquisition of different language versions of the same social group, or of an entirely new language, is a lifelong process of identity.

Second language acquisition (SLA) theorists need to develop a comprehensive conceptualization of the relationship between the language learner and the social environment. He states that SLA theorists still do not speak decisively about the influence of the power effect between the learner and the speakers of the language on the reciprocal relationship. Based on an experiment conducted in Canada between January and December 1991 (based on data collected from questionnaires, individual and group interviews, and home visits), the author investigated the circumstances under which immigrant women took advantage of opportunities to speak English and why they sometimes resisted speaking English. He suggests that the concept of "investment", not motivation, is important in strengthening the relationship between the language learner and the native speaker.

Unlike spoken language, written language is learned consciously and voluntarily. It is for this reason that social identities accept the identity of the language they speak earlier than the identity of the language they write. When we approach the relationship between language and identity from an educational perspective, especially when we discuss it from the perspective of foreign

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language teaching, we can see that students are usually required to put aside their local identity in the learning process and accept the identity of the foreign language being taught. Sometimes, the identity of both languages manifests itself in the learning process. In such situations, migrant students, who are currently being pushed by the globalized world, face more difficulties. It is not easy to forget one's local identity and adopt a new identity according to the norms of the society and language in which one exists. It is up to the teachers to overcome this challenge. Foreign language teachers should take into account that they are actually giving students a new identity when teaching a new language. Otherwise, it will be quite difficult to acquire a competent speech in a new language.

In addition, children should be taught from an early age the process of demonstrating different language competence in different social groups. B. P. Christina points out that the failure to teach social identity norms along with language norms is the biggest obstacle to acquiring competent speech. In his book "Language and Communicative Competence", two dialogues related to the use of different language norms in communication with different social identities are mentioned. In the first dialogue, two students are talking about a movie they are watching, then one of the students meets his mother's friend on his way home and they talk about the same movie along the way. This conversation is reflected in the second dialogue. The book notes that the child uses different words and phrases in both contexts. This shows that the language we use on the same topic can change according to different social identities. Thus, in the educational process, teaching students the rules of using language in accordance with their social identities plays an indispensable role in achieving a competent communication process [Christina 1992, p. 44].

As mentioned above, it is possible to study the relationship between language competence and identity from a cultural perspective. It is clear that language is part of culture, in other words, language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. We transmit our culture and its components from generation to generation through language. K. Gibson explains this close relationship with a very beautiful definition and notes that language is a complex dance that exists in the internal and external singing of human identity [Gibson 2004, p.12]. The power of language is the factor that shapes and determines the life experience of a person as an individual.

CONCLUSION

Language creates a framework for people to perceive and analyze the world around them. Describing our world is a result of the help of our words. Sometimes our words are not enough to describe our feelings, or even though we can present a situation in different ways in one language, the same words may not exist in another language. That is, the role of words in a story is similar to the role of language in human identity. If a story is measured by what the expressions in it convey to the reader, how a person's identity is understood by the people around him is framed by the language norms he uses.

Considering all the above, language has a special place in the perception of human identity by others as well as by oneself. The language a person uses, or more precisely, the way he presents language, embodies his identity. Examples include slang used among teenagers, idiosyncratic words used among peers, academic terms, and others. The identity that presents itself to people for the first time tries to choose the right expressions because it will make a first impression on people. If this process could be expressed in one word, it would be "Speak, let me tell you who you are". As a result of the close relationship between language and identity, the development of the former lays the foundation for the development of the latter.

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