



Language and Identity: The Impact of a Multilingual Environment on the Personal Identity among German Mother Tongue Speakers Living in Malaysia

Miroslava Majtanova* and Mohd. Azidan Abdul Jabar

*Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Through 18 interviews with German mother tongue speakers living in Malaysia, we investigate the impact of a foreign language on the individual's identity. In this context, the study relies on the Social Identity Theory and Social Categorization Theory which focus on identity. We suggest that the use of a foreign language serves as a substitute for the mother tongue in the construal of identity only to a certain extent. This phenomenon becomes most apparent in situations where the competency of the language is crucial for the respondent involved in communication. Depending on the importance of the situation the respondents experience a different level of achievement/failure in expressing their identity. At the same time, the respondents evaluate identity of their communication partner by rating their language skills. Our findings further indicate that language makes a linkage between personal and social identities which is reflected in the feelings and behaviour of respondents in situations, when they cannot understand the language others use around them. Additionally the individual's identity perception does not seem to be influenced by the length of stay in Malaysia, nor by a long/short term relationship with a non-German speaking partner. The mother tongue however becomes replaceable, provided the respondent gained the knowledge in a certain area in a foreign language. In this case, the individual will have difficulty to communicate about that particular area in his mother tongue except with practice.

Keywords: Identity, foreign language, German native speakers, language and identity, multilingualism

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E-mail addresses:

miroslava@upm.edu.my (Miroslava Majtanova),

azid@upm.edu.my (Mohd. Azidan Abdul Jabar)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

Edwards (2009, p.20) states that "since language is central to the human condition, and since many have argued that it is the

most salient distinguishing characteristic of our species, it seems likely that any study of identity must surely include some consideration on its use". We share Edwards's opinion and explore the individual's identity perception in terms of language within the scope of a multilingual environment which mirrors other studies (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Anchimbe, 2007). However, this study is investigated from the perspective of a Malaysian context and that from the German mother tongue speakers living in this country. The objective of our investigation was to find out, how the use of a foreign language affects the individual's personal identity in a multilingual environment. We were further interested to learn if our respondents perceived a foreign language as an equal substitute for their mother tongue, in relation to their personal identity and feelings about their identity in case they do not speak a language where their conversation partners communicate in. We hypothesized that the level of proficiency in the target foreign language plays a significant role in the construal of the individual's identity and thus influences the individual's perception of the importance of his mother tongue. We further hypothesized that the longer period of time the individual spends in a multilingual environment, the less importance will he put on his mother tongue.

To analyze this matter, we outlined our interview questions based on previous studies conducted on language and identity based on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Social Categorization Theory (SCT).

We also used the Twenty Statement Test (TST) developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954) to expand the angle of evaluation in our study. The SIT and SCT were derived from studies by Henri Tajfel, John C. Turner and others. Both theories have a long term tradition in the social psychology (see Brown 2000, p.746) and deal with the identity through group memberships. They argue that individual perceives oneself and others through categories. Categories, according to Tajfel and Turner relate to the "psychological representations in the mind; where there is presence of cognitive structures which people use to *define themselves* and to change their behavior" (Turner, 1982, p.21; Turner & Reynolds, 2003, p.137). Individuals thus categorize others and themselves, i. e. self-categorize, into various sociological groups either/or cognitively and/or evaluative and/or emotionally. The range of one to three of these factors also builds the main components of social identity as defined by Tajfel (1974, p.69, 1978b, p.63). In the said study by Tajfel, he developed a definition which we also follow. For the purpose of our current paper: "social identity will be understood as that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978b, p.63). The self-concept, as defined by Turner, is in simplified words a cognitive system that allows individuals to perceive themselves as coherent entities over time (Turner, 1982, pp.18-19). Turner himself build the

SCT based on the principals of the SIT and targeted his research on explanations of how a sociological group becomes a psychological group (Turner & Reynolds, 2003, p.137). The TST from Kuhn and McPartland (Turner & Reynolds, 2003) addresses the identity through the question 'Who am I?' that respondents usually have to answer with twenty different statements (comp. e. g. Dana, 2005, p.109; Carpenter & Meade-Pruitt, 2008). The TST provides to some extent an access to the way an individual self-categorizes himself into different sociological and psychological groups for which we perceive it to be a valuable complement of our analysis and that is why we included it into our study.

Personal identity will be for the purpose of this paper understood as the individual's perception of himself as an individual person and as a member of diverse groups that are meaningful to him. The expression 'self' refers in our text to an individual person and the expression 'other(s)' refers to other individuals.

In the following sections, we will first illuminate the language situation in Malaysia and address the factors that led to a multilingualism of this country. In the next section, we will discuss the views and theories of researchers with regard to language and identity and we will also outline the theories concerning identity that we build our investigation upon. Subsequently, the results of our research will be presented and summarized in a separate section.

LANGUAGE SITUATION IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia embraces a number of variations of the local official language *Bahasa Melayu* (for the term 'language variation' cf. Ammon, 1995, 1997). In addition, other languages were introduced during the colonization of the country. In 1957, when Malaysia gained its independence, people of Chinese and Indian origin had formed already a significant part of the Malaysian population. The presence of Chinese, Indian and other foreign inhabitants in Malaysia started according to Omar (2007) in the 14th century and then increased especially at the end of 19th century. Many Indians were brought to Malaysia by the British to fill job vacancies, Chinese chose this country for entrepreneurial purposes. This is why Malaysian policy distinguishes between people who are said to be the original population of the geographical area of Malaysia and between those who originate from other states. The indigenous population, also called *Bumiputera* (i.e. the sons and daughters of the soil) is further differentiated into Malays and *Other Bumiputera*. The former group comprises people who are Muslims, lead a Malay way of life and speak the Malay language. *Other Bumiputera* refer to aborigine ethnic groups who are not Muslims, but are "closely related to the Malays in terms of language and primordial culture" (Omar, 2007, p.337). At the present time, Malays and the *Other Bumiputera* groups represent 60,6%, Chinese 22,8% and Indians 6,8% of the Malaysian population (Population census, 2011). The *Other*

Bumiputera nevertheless embrace more than fifty different indigenous ethno-linguistic groups, including the descendants of Portuguese and Thais, who came into this country in the early 16th century (Population census, 2011). Malaysian Chinese as well as Indian citizens likewise do not fall into homogenous ethno-linguistic groups, but have many different ones in accordance to their background. Hence there are Malaysian Chinese communicating among each other in Hokkien, Cantonese, Khek, Hakka, Teochew, Hokchiu, Hainanese, Kwongsai or Mandarin. Malaysian Indian citizens are usually proficient in Tamil, yet the use of other Indian languages is also common (comp. also Omar, 1982, p.52, 2007, p.346).

There are several reasons for the Chinese and Indian Malaysians to preserve the languages of their ancestors. One reason is the relatively separate lifestyle they led up to the 1960's. Indians usually worked on rubber plantations or the railways and thus lived in areas that were near to their work. Schools as well as other facilities were established and financed by the government in those areas for them. The language chosen as the medium of instruction in the schools was Tamil. *Bumiputeras* usually lived in rural areas in *kampungs* (villages) and made their living through agricultural work or fishing. The language of communication was a local variation and literacy was first established in Arabic with instruction in Islam in the houses of chieftains, in mosques and privately founded village religious schools (Omar, 2007). The Chinese mainly settled down in tin mining or urban areas.

They set up their own businesses and also their own schools that followed the Chinese education system. Thus the language of instruction in Chinese schools was Mandarin. Later on primary and secondary government schools were established by the British and replaced the indigenous education system. The instruction in these schools was in English and they were however parallel institutions to the Indian and Chinese schools. These English medium schools were not financially accessible to everyone, hence only people with a strong financial background could afford going to these English medium schools (Omar, 2007; David & Govindasamy, 2006).

Naturally there were some sectors of neighbourhoods that embraced various ethnicities. Yet the majority lived within their own ethnic group and thus had no reason to interact with their ethnic outgroups (comp. Zaman, 2008, p.234; Omar, 2007). The first foundation that allowed ethnic mingling via education was through the establishment of a tertiary institution named 'The King Edward VII Medical School' in 1905. After the Second World War this college was merged with the Raffles College, Singapore in 1928. Together, they formed a university called University of Malaya (Moris, 2007, p.7 & 14). In 1959, the university was developed in Kuala Lumpur as well as in Singapore. Considerable expansion took place in a short time and by 1962 the university became an autonomous national university in Kuala Lumpur. Its campus in Singapore was subsequently renamed into University of Singapore after

Singapore became an independent state in 1965 (Moris, 2007, p.16, see also Universiti Malaya Calender 1970-71, pp.5-7). Even though it was open to all, only families of higher status could consider this institution as the right choice for their children. In view of its expenses and location, the majority or 85% of the students were Chinese (Omar, 2007, p.343).

At the present time (the ethnic and along with it the language interaction) still depend to a large extent on the education system (David & Govindasamy, 2006; David, 2004; Kim, 2008, pp.56-57; Syed Husin Ali, 2008, p.92). The primary and secondary education takes place in the national and vernacular schools which distinguishes them in the language of instruction and in the ethnic population of their pupils. Thus, the medium of instruction is Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil or a combination of them. The pupils' ethnicity reflects the main language of instruction. Among the other factors contributing to the state of the language use in Malaysia is the degree of ethnic diversity in the place of the individual's residence and the cultural heritage of the ethnic groups. An attempt to bridge the gaps among the various Malaysian groups is the establishment of the 'vision schools'. These schools, usually a pair consisting of a government and a vernacular one, share some of their facilities such as playgrounds or canteens. Currently there are five schools of this type in the country. Apart from that, a new program was introduced in Malaysia to create opportunities for youth to interact with their peers of other ethnic groups over

a period of three months. This program is called 'national service'.

Notwithstanding the efforts mentioned above, multiethnicity and multilingualism continue to grow in Malaysia. David and Govindasamy (2006, p.56) state that there were "at least a hundred languages" in use at the time of writing. One factor in this diversity may be that professionals and companies from all around the world contribute to Malaysia's development, through their expertise or their own investments. Immigration of laborers and domestic workers in search of job opportunities - mainly from Asian countries, and especially Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh - may be another factor. Moreover, being depicted as an opportune educational hub, Malaysia saw an increase in the influx of foreign students from African and Middle East countries, who flock to Malaysian universities.

Malaysia could thus appear to be a modern Babylon. However, the country certainly does not suffer lack of communication among its people. A common language has in fact been one of the main concerns of the government since independence. The discussion about the Malaysian national language started in 1948, at the time of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia (Omar, 2007). Malays suggested the Malay language, but the rest of the population did not agree. Non-Malays were slightly dominant in number then (David & Govindasamy, 2006, p.56) and suggested to have either two languages, Malay and English or four national languages by adding

Mandarin and Tamil as well. Finally it was decided to recognize Malay and English as national languages for a period of 10 years. After that a 'language nation' was supposed to arise (cf. Ammon, 1995, pp.18-34 for the term 'language nation') and according to Omar (1998, p.202) eventually it did indeed succeed: "For the last three and a half decades, the Malay language has faced the challenge of building itself to give an identity to the people who use it as a vehicle of communication within its national boundary. It has achieved its goal in this aspect. Malaysians have an identity in having a national language that is native to the soil". Although English stopped being an official language of the country in 1967 in Peninsular Malaysia and in 1985 in Sabah and Sarawak, it still remained in use within the court rooms, because of the fact that many Malaysian lawyers had pursued their studies in England. Similarly on many occasions communication among Chinese and Indian citizens were and still are held in their respective languages, whereas functions with multiethnic participants often involve English along with other local languages.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) explain linguistic acts as acts of identity. They say that the prior function of words is to first of all express the identity of oneself and others and not to name 'things'. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller believe that each individual knows the linguistic patterns of his ingroup and thus is able to develop for himself

certain patterns of linguistic behaviour. S/he will then modify his linguistic behaviour into 'focussed' and 'non-focussed' language acts according to his intention to identify himself with a certain group or to distinguish himself from others. There are however, four main criteria that need to be fulfilled in terms to use the 'focussed' linguistic systems. Firstly, the individual has to be able to identify groups. Secondly, s/he has to have access to the groups and to be able to analyse the behaviour of these groups. Thirdly, the individual has to be motivated to join these groups and finally s/he has to be able to modify his/her behaviour. The motivation seems to be according to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller the most important criteria. The motivation to learn a certain language for instance can lead to neglecting of or even to an aversion towards the mother tongue. Language is in their opinion not the only factor that defines identity, but it serves as a tool to decode and to express identities.

We can find a similar point of view on language in the work of Giles and his 'Accommodation Theory' (comp. also Coupland, 2007, p.109; Tabouret-Keller, 1998, pp.322-333). Giles Theory is based on the work of social psychologists related to similarity attraction. This theory says that individuals are evaluated by others better, when they manage to reduce dissimilarity between each other (Giles & Powesland, 1975, p.157). In addition to this theory, Giles assumes that individuals will reduce linguistic dissimilarities between themselves and the individual/group by whom they wish to be judged positively.

Giles calls this kind of linguistic behaviour, which includes also non-verbal features such as smile, eye contact etc., convergence. The opposite of this linguistic behaviour Giles calls 'divergence' (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977, p.322; Giles, 1978, p.384). According to the Accommodation Theory, individuals always adjust their speech acts depending on the fact if they wish to identify themselves with others. This theory has been studied by many researchers and throughout the years became an "integrated, interdisciplinary statement of relational processes in communicative interaction" (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991, p.2). Convergence and divergence can further emerge in different grades and combinations. It means that the speaker can adjust his linguistic behaviour completely or just partially to the style of his communication partner. It is also possible that within a conversation one of the partners might apply convergence, whereas the other divergence.

In his later work Tabouret-Keller (1998, p.317) states that language does not just help to express or decode identity, but it also combines personal¹ and social identities: "Language features are the link which binds individual and social identities together. Language offers both the means of creating this link and that of expressing it." He sees the foundation of this phenomenon on the one hand in the conscious or unconscious adoption of a feature or a set of features of behaviour of another individual. On the other hand this relationship is supported according to him by the institutionalisation

and legalisation of a language. Once a language is given a legitimacy linked to power over a territory for instance or over key institutions in a country, it can be materialised and totemised. Materialisation, or 'reification' as Tabouret-Keller puts it, is usually related to the use of the particular language in written texts, in dictionaries, in the courts etc. 'Totemization' is related to the social features of the language, especially its representation of a certain social group.

Riley (2008) argues that language and social identity are connected in at least three ways. The connection to language is in his opinion first of all to be seen in the fact that the social identity is coded in language. Secondly, the social identity influences the vocabulary and the speech style of the individuals, and thirdly it allows multilingual individuals to express their membership in diverse social groups. Based on Riley's examples, individuals apply their repertoires consciously according to the given situation. To him language is actually the basis of the individuals' identity: "identity is made of knowledge and language is both what we know and how we know it" (Riley, 2008, p.91).

Also the contributors in Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004, p.19) understand identity to be interlinked with language, since they explain it as 'social, discursive, and narrative options offered by a particular society in a specific time and place'. Individuals as well as groups use these options in their social life to name themselves, to characterize themselves or to win their social privileges. They further state, that identity choices

¹Tabouret-Keller uses the term 'individual identity'.

are however not possible in all situations. They further argue that individuals cannot express their identities to their liking once certain common identity interpretations exist that are supported by a higher power. These kinds of identities should be then understood as conditioned ones through socio-political and economic circumstances for instance. Identities should be therefore investigated rather in situations where the individuals experience concurrence or a certain crisis in their life, because their identities become most apparent at that point of time. Language and identity shape each other, since language provides certain linguistic tools that construct and negotiate identities and identity ideologies steer the linguistic tools, which individuals use to express their identities as well as to reckon identities of others.

The way Edwards (2009) describes the ties between language and identity can be in our opinion understood as direct and indirect. The direct relation is in the use of language by individuals. They adjust their speech style according to their gender and to the given situation to represent their identities. Thus certain linguistic features will become apparent only in the communication with members of distinct groups. Edwards points also out that language carries identity features when it comes to names of individuals as well as of groups (Edwards, 2009, pp.34-39). Names are of a great importance especially if they are supposed to highlight a certain feature of its carrier or if they are linked with religious or protective meanings for

instance². Groups also choose and get³ names in order to achieve to some extent an expression of their identity. The indirect linkage between language and identity is again seen in the importance of language when it comes to religion or to unconscious perceptions of identity based on language. In the first case one can think of the fact that language was frequently spread together with religion. Nowadays, there are still cases where the holy scripts of some religions are introduced in the original language and cannot be translated into another.

Joseph (2004, p.13) holds like Tabouret-Keller (see above 1998, p.315) the opinion that language and identity are inseparable. He argues that each individual decodes and categorises others also based on their linguistic features (what they say and how they say it, e. g. accents, voices etc.) and at the same time ascribes them certain identity features (Joseph, 2004, pp.2-3; see also Spolsky, 1999, p.181). This applies not just to individuals one meets in person, but also to people one speaks on the phone with, hears on radio or sees on the television etc. Joseph suggests that in order to investigate somebody's identity the individual himself must become a part of the interpretation instead of just being a subject of observation:

² e.g. the female Slavic name 'Miroslava' carries the meaning of 'the one, who celebrates peace' or the male name 'Daniel' originates in the Hebrew culture and means 'God is my judge' (examples added by the authors of this paper).

³ For instance while "the Welsh call themselves *Cymry* (meaning something like 'fellow countrymen'), the English name for them derives from the Anglo-Saxon *w(e)alh*, via the Germanic *Wälsche* ('stranger', 'foreigner', or even 'barbarian')" (Edwards, 2009, p.37).

“A full account of linguistic communication would have to start with, not a message, but again the speakers themselves, and their interpretation of each other that determines, interactively, their interpretation of what is said” (Joseph, 2004, p.226). He suggests further that identity should be recognized as another function of language along with representation and communication: “identity is itself at the very heart of what language is about, how it operates, why and how it came into existence and evolved as it did, how it is learned and how it is used, every day, by every user, every time it is used” (Joseph, 2004, p.224).

All of the researchers mentioned above perceive language as a tool to identify others as well as oneself. We also hold the view that language helps individuals to understand and to express their own identity as well as to understand and to describe the identity of others. We further argue that this position is in line with the SIT and SCT. As stated in the introductory part of this paper the perception of identity requires categorization. And we see the connection between the language and categorization in the fact that “when we hear someone speak, we immediately make guesses about gender, educational level, age, profession, and place of origin” Spolsky (1999, p.181). Hence we categorize others and ourselves, i. e. self-categorize, into certain sociological groups. We believe that in certain situations individuals make even more guesses and judgments based on language than as cited earlier. We assume that individuals may additionally distinguish some identity facets of their communication

partner in terms of the personality of the communication partner.

From the discussion in the literature review it becomes apparent that Malaysia offers an ideal situation to investigate the links between language and identity. However, the research in Malaysia has focused mainly on matters pertaining to national identity: “Identity at the lower level, for example the community or the group, has not really been given much attention to by researchers. Among the few who have made this topic their area of research interest are Maya Khemlani David (1996) in her research on the Sindhis (a minority group) in Malaysia, and Asmah Haji Omar with her research on a group of bilingual academics” (Asmah Haji Omar, 2003). Apart from these two linguists, the work of Nur Atiqah Tang Abdullah (2001) can be mentioned, who deals with the connection between the identity and citizenship education in Malaysia. Othman Mohamed Aris (1978), who looked at the ethnic identity in a Malay community in Malaysia, similar to Sharin Selva Raj (2005), whereas her investigations were among Malaysian Chinese and Indian respondents. Lyngkaran and Kunaletschumy (2002) researched the Malaysian Indian community, Colin Nicholas (2005) focused his paper on Malaysia’s *Orang Asli*, i. e. the aboriginal population and John R. Clammer (1980) discussed the ambiguity of identity in the *Baba* communities of Malaysia and Singapore. An attentive eye will not miss that even though these studies involve different groups, they still remain in the scope of ‘Malaysian identity’, since they all

elaborate on Malaysians. We decided on the contrary to explore our research questions among foreigners and chose for this purpose German mother tongue speakers. Our decision was driven by the notion that our subjects will be on the one hand less likely affected by the stereotypes spread among Malaysians towards each other in terms of various group memberships and that the German mother tongue speakers might on the other hand find themselves more often confronted by the language variety used in Malaysia than the locals would.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Language plays a big role in the expression of the individual's identity. It allows him to some extent to comprehend and to describe himself through language. Furthermore the language gives the individual the possibility to compete with identities that would be otherwise ascribed to him by the society. In our view, the language the individual is most fluent in is the language(s) he grew up with, in other words his mother tongue(s). So what happens with the expression of the personal identity if one is not or not always able to use his mother tongue? How does the individual feel in such situations? Is the use of a foreign language an equal substitute for his mother tongue when it comes to his personal identity? And what if his language skills in the target language he ought to use reach less than an intermediate level or if he does not speak nor understand that particular language at all? Will it matter to him not being able to take a part on the conversation and thus being perceived for

instance as a quiet person by the others? Will he feel disadvantaged and experience lack of expression of his personal identity? Yet, what does a person who masters the language to the highest proficiency level experience in the very same situation? What does the very same person feel, when he cannot find the 'proper' word he would have used in his mother tongue? Last but not least, does it come to an identity change, if an individual uses a foreign language as a *lingua franca* for a long period of time?

The main questions we set to investigate in terms of the effects the use of a foreign language has on the individual's personal identity in a multilingual environment are:

1. Do our respondents perceive a foreign language as an equal substitute for their mother tongue, when it comes to their personal identity?
2. How do they feel about their identity in case they don't speak a language their conversation partners communicate in?
3. Does the length of stay in Malaysia affects the respondents' personal identity?
4. How important is the mother tongue vs. foreign language for the respondents in terms of relationships?

PARTICIPANTS

Overall 19 participants took part in our investigation during October and November 2011: 10 females and 9 males. As mentioned above, all respondents were German mother tongue speakers, the majority (17) were of German origin. The length of stay of the

participants in Malaysia varied between few weeks (six weeks the shortest) to 37 years.

METHODOLOGY

The data were collected from 18 interviews with German mother tongue speakers currently living in Malaysia. We decided to exclude the data collected from one male participant, because he chose not to answer most of our questions with an explanation such as “I can’t give you the answer now” and hence no valid feedback was obtained. We placed emphasis on the fact that they grew up in Europe and only came to Malaysia as adults. The other important factor to us was their length of stay in Malaysia in order to check, whether it has any influence on their identity perception. We set no other criteria in terms of being able to look for tendencies that could be in the future studies investigated quantitatively. Some of the respondents were known to us, whereas some were added to the project via the snowball sampling method (see e. g. Babbie, 2013, pp.191-192; Babbie, 2011, p.208; Bailey, 1994, p.96). All interviews were conducted in the German language. The respondents were further informed that their answers would remain anonymous.

The interviews were later transcribed and coded so that the data could be entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The transcriptions helped us to maintain a qualitative insight into the responses, while the coding of the responses into variables helped us to gain a faster and clearer overview over the data. In accordance to the nature of our study we

only used the descriptive tools of the SPSS, i. e. frequencies and cross tabulation, for data evaluation. The choice to partially evaluate and to present the data in percentage serves at the same time as a guideline for setting working hypothesis for further research in regard to this topic.

We started the data evaluation with the insertion of data from transcripts into the SPSS. We followed the usual procedure for nominal and ordinal data such as gender, length of stay, country of origin, proficiency and fluency in languages etc. Questions that are related to emotions and behaviour such as ‘What do you do and how do you feel in case you are excluded from a conversation because of the language?’ were turned into variables the following way: ‘bad feeling, can’t understand language’ - 1=yes, 2=no; ‘behaviour, can’t understand language’ – string (i. e. we typed in the keywords from the statements). Questions related to self-categorization were turned into variables also in a standard way, e. g. ‘identification with Malaysians’: 1=yes, 2=no, 3=partially both. Based on the SPSS-frequencies we turned back to our transcripts and checked for similarities among ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers etc. After that we distinguished ‘factors’ and ‘categories’ among similar statements, to highlight the respective finding (e. g. “strong family orientation” or “subconscious code switching”).

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We started our interviews with the Twenty Statements Test (TST) from Kuhn and McPartland (1954), which is a frequently

used technique for assessment of an individual's sense of identity (comp. e. g. Dana, 2005, p.109). Our respondents were thus asked to give us 20 different answers to the question 'Who am I?' We used this method to observe whether our respondents would include a mention of their mother tongue.

The second part of the interview consisted from 20 open-ended questions we developed in line with the SIT and SCT. The questions are focused on self-categorization through group memberships and on the use of language and its personal value for the participant. The participants were however given the opportunity to report freely on additional matters that were of importance to them. Our main questions were the following:

1. Do you identify with Malaysians/with your fellow countrymen that live in Malaysia in some way? If yes, in what ways?
2. Do you perceive your identity to be different in comparison to Malaysians/ to your fellow countrymen that live in Malaysia? If yes, in what ways?
3. What languages do you speak and at what level (fluent, good, just few words...)?
4. What languages do you use in Malaysia? When? Which one is your favourite and why?
5. Does it happen that you sometimes think in a foreign language even though you don't necessarily have to? (e. g. You are not engaged in a conversation

involving foreign language, nor do you have to deal with correspondence in a foreign language.)

6. What do you do and how do you feel in case you are excluded from a conversation because of the language? (e.g. People at your table communicate in a language in which you are not proficient.)
7. Is it/would it be important for you that your partner and children speak/ understand your mother tongue? Why?
8. Is it/would it be important for you to learn the mother tongue of your partner? Why?
9. With whom do you spend your free time? Does your mother tongue play any role in it?
10. a) Do your good friends tell you that you changed as a person since you live in Malaysia? If yes, in what way?
b) Do you think you have changed because of living in Malaysia? If yes, in what way?
11. To what extent does your mother tongue and other languages you use play a role in expressing your identity?
12. Do you judge others by their language skills? When? How? (e. g. You receive an e-mail/phone call. You meet a new person at a party...).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The number of answers related to mentioning German as part of the self in the scope of the Twenty Statements Test reached 33%.

28% mentioned connection to the language indirectly by mentioning the use of German in their profession and/or by stating their ethnicity. The rest, i. e. 39%, did not mention the mother tongue at all. It could be argued that the respondents did not see the necessity to stress their mother tongue as part of their identity, since the interview was held in their mother tongue. However, we can report that when the respondents were asked directly about the role of the mother tongue and other languages they speak in expressing their identity (question (11)), 83% of them stated that they perceive it to be important. We will come to this point again and discuss it in more detail.

Our data concerning identity perception based on self-categorization in comparison with Malaysians and fellow countrymen of the respondents show that the time spent in Malaysia by the respondents has no significant influence in this matter. In total, only 39% of the respondents identify in some way with Malaysians, despite the fact that 61% of them live in a relationship with a Malaysian. They identify with Malaysians as follows: in the concept of simplicity of the self, strong family orientation, taking religion as a part of the everyday life and placing less value on materialism and individualism. One of the respondents added:

'... Apart from that I can identify very well with the 'lepak'-custom. Thus just sit around, eat, drink and talk.'

The statements about dissimilarities in identity perception when compared to Malaysians indicate three main points: time management and efficiency, values (especially in prioritizing form over content) and the concept of hygiene. What follows are extracts taken from the interviews illustrating the above findings. All three participants are married to Malaysians. The first example is from a respondent, who has lived in this country for the past six years:

'They have this listlessness, I would love to have it, but I don't have it. ... And they are old fashioned. They love these endlessly long names and titles and hierarchy, all of it is totally foreign to me. And sometimes they would come up with something very funny like – the pregnant ladies are expected to dress less sexy, because it might disturb the students!'

This person spent in Malaysia 27 years:

'I always believe to be completely different, completely otherwise. Since I find it to be important to come on time, or at least to let the other know that I'm running late as well as I find it to be important to treat others nicely despite having bad mood myself. ... My friends are actually only Europeans, even though I work with Malaysians I don't like to meet them in my free time. ... And I find it difficult to work with them.'

The third utterance is from a respondent living in Malaysia since 31 years:

'There is no such thing as German perfectionism here. I am still not used to it and I am inwardly much more German in this regard. ... Or ok, I live in a high building and 200 meters from another 30-stock office tower, yet I have to walk to LRT⁴ through a pile of dirt. I guess I will never get used to things like that. ... I have the impression that Malaysians don't take their work seriously. At least not as seriously as Germans do. They lack the ambition to improve or show that they are worthy of their position. That is not good on the one hand, because then many things don't work as they should. On the other hand I like that the locals don't put themselves under such a huge self-pressure like the Germans do.'

The comparison with other country members living in Malaysia brought us to the following piece of finding: our respondents strongly differentiate between German mother tongue speakers (GMS) living 'locally' in a financially equal way to that of the Malaysians and those living as expatriates⁵. The frequency of identification regarding this point equaled the non-

identification. For those who have a similar perception with other GMS we were able to conclude that the bonds are: similar values, similar interests and similar fate. The same *lingua franca* and country of origin was mentioned only by one respondent when including answers solely to question No. (1) and (2) (see the list of our interview questions). Those that do not have a similar perception with other GMS regarded as due to social status. These respondents are not inclined to meet other GMS, unless they match their own social status. Expatriates are further perceived as people living in an unnatural world missing the true picture of the host country. One respondent expressed her dislike in GMS, who are too critical towards Malaysians. Another said that she does not like to mingle with GMS, who are 'too German in a negative way'.

All of the respondents are fluent in English except one, who ranked her proficiency to be moderate. 13 respondents speak other non-Asian language(s) of who two rated the level of their proficiency as fluent, three as moderate and eight as basic. The knowledge of Asian languages was slightly higher, since three respondents do not master any, while five do not master any other non-Asian ones. Three respondents are fluent in an Asian language, two moderate and ten have basic skills mostly in *Bahasa Melayu*. Most of the respondents also use English at work and in their everyday life, when dealing with locals and foreigners with other language background. 10 respondents also use German at their work place and five within their family. Respondents living in

⁴ LRT (Light Rapid Transit) is a town train.

⁵ The word expatriate carries within Malaysia generally the connotation of foreigners who were sent to Malaysia by a foreign company, which covers all their expenses above the local average standards.

a mixed relationship with a Malaysian use English for communication, one respondent uses also Tamil and two speak Malay occasionally with their partners. Two respondents admitted using an appropriate language to ease certain situations. One of them swears in German when she wants to express anger, but does not want others to understand the exact words. The other respondent speaks Malay with officers and policeman in order to achieve the goal with ease. Respondent No. 2, 4 and 13 feel that Malaysians like it when foreigners use their mother tongue(s) but they also learn and use *Bahasa Melayu* to be perceived better by the Malaysians. These last five mentioned respondents thus use language as a tool for self-categorization into local groups when they consider it to be appropriate.

The question 'What is your favourite language?' yielded the answer 'German' from 72% of respondents. 5.5% answered English and a local Asian language each and 17%, i. e. three replies, were ascribed to the variable 'other'. The answers we marked as "other" are the following:

'I speak German at work, English in life and Tamil with friends and volunteers in the society I'm active in. I like all three languages each in its own setting.'

(Respondent No. 2, he is fluent in all three languages)

'Swabian (Schwäbisch) is the closest one to me. I can't say German, even though I speak perfect German of

course. But German is completely different from Swabian. It's as different as German from English, for instance. It is the language of my home, I grew up with it. I can express completely different things with it and feel other emotions when using it.'

(Respondent No. 13, he is fluent in English and Malay)

'The language of eye contact, since I'm no friend of many words.'

(Respondent No. 1, he is fluent in English, Portuguese and has basic language skills in Spanish)

The most frequently given reason for perceiving German as the favourite language was 'because it is my mother tongue'. The second most frequently given reason was 'because I have the best vocabulary in German so I can express myself best in it'. Some other reasons are stated below, all cited subjects are fluent in English:

'I feel safer when speaking German.'
(Respondent No. 17)

'Sometimes it's really demanding to speak a foreign language, especially when I'm tired. Words simply don't come as easy as in the mother tongue in a foreign language and when I'm tired, it's even worse. That's sometimes also frustrating ... because I like

to express myself through rich vocabulary ... sometimes I just don't feel like talking in English at all, when I'm tired.'

(Respondent No. 18)

'I like to speak English, I'm an English teacher, I studied in England, I speak English already longer than for a half of my life. I can express myself very well in English, throughout the years sometimes even better than in German. But when I can talk German, fluently and freely like with you now, that's wonderful! Then I can be me. I can be myself.'

(Respondent No. 14)

'German – because it is the language in which I think most often.'

(Respondent No. 9)

'In what language(s) do you think and if it happens that you think in a foreign language, even though it is not necessary at that moment (5)', was our next question. 39% of the answers indicated thinking in German and 61% in various languages.

One respondent stated to use English proverbs with the explanation that some of them do not exist in German and that s/he finds them fitting in certain circumstances. S/he feels the need to apply those utterances to express hers/his attitude and thoughts. The explanations we interpreted as 'subconscious code switching' were described usually as

'sometimes English words pop up in my mind, even though I'm thinking in German'. The other frequent answer we added to this category was e. g. 'when I think of somebody, with whom I usually speak English, then I also talk to him in my mind in English'. Therefore it appears to us useful to orientate questions in future studies in more detail on this phenomenon and to explore it in regard to whom the respondents think about. One respondent realized during our session that the language he used last stays in his mind because he can speak and think well in three languages:

'Very often, but it is usually influenced by the time of day. The language I use as the first one ... and I usually switch to the language of my communication partner. All of that happens subconsciously. ... Then I keep thinking in the language I talked with to that person. ... Yes, even though the conversation is over and I am by myself again. ... Yes, I stay in that language until I deal with somebody in another language again.'

(Respondent No. 2)

Why is the topic the respondents think about important for their choice of language? The medium for thinking was described in all cases with statements such as 'I learned it in that language, I can't think of it in any other language' (Respondent No. 14). Respondent No. 13 stated:

'Praying and things like that I never translate. I grew up with it, yet when you ask me about computers, I will rather explain you all about it in English than in German, because I learned it that way. I started to work with computers as an adult here in Malaysia and whatever I know about it is in English. Then it's really difficult for me to speak about it in German.'

Are there situations when the respondents would prefer to use their mother tongue? This was confirmed with a 'yes' by 83% of the respondents. In what situations would that be, was answered with replies that we understand as belonging to two categories: when lacking language proficiency in the foreign language and when lacking physical energy. The lack of language skills causes uncertainty and negative feelings about oneself and the whole situation. The lack of physical power is interlinked with the lack of mental power, hence causes difficulty using a foreign language. Here some examples in the words of our respondents:

'At the doctor, offices, car workshops ... I feel like a fool there just because I don't know the words.'

(Respondent No. 8)

'When I have to understand small printed texts! They are usually tricky, companies don't want you

to read them and they make it real hard to read them even in your mother tongue. Or when I need to follow such texts as instructions to do something.'

(Respondent No. 7)

'When I want to express myself precisely, when I want to go deeper in conversation. ... it's hard for me to read in English when I'm tired ...'

(Respondent No. 12)

The 17% who don't feel the need to use their mother tongue in any situations gave us these answers:

'I like to learn new languages.'

(Respondent No. 5)

'No, I'd rather use more English, especially at work, so that I could explain things better ...'

(Respondent No. 10)

'No, because I like to keep distance.'

(Respondent No. 1)

How do the respondents feel and what do they do in situations, when they do not understand the language others use around them? 39% stated they do not feel troubled by being a part of conversation they do not comprehend, whereas the other 61% do feel troubled. The former finds that in Malaysia it is completely normal

to be excluded through language from a conversation, so they just observe the others – the mimicking and gestures of others or they just ‘switch off’. Therefore this group could be characterized as a passive one. The second group is on the contrary an active one, since all the respondents do not hesitate to interfere by asking questions, such as ‘What did s/he say?’ or by saying something to call attention to themselves. Most of the respondents stated that when that does not work, they stop trying and either endure the situation with a negative feeling or leave. Some of the respondents from the latter group emphasized that they view using any language the conversation partner cannot understand for an unnecessary long time as highly impolite.

Our next question was, whether the respondents experience lack of expression of their personal identity in those kind of situations or in any kind of situation, where they lack certain language proficiency. Again the percentage of ‘yes’ was higher than those ‘no’, and the percentage remained the same as in the previous data set. The 39% who gave ‘no’ as an answer were not able to explain their reasons. Among the 61% experiencing lack of expression of their personal identity the answers were dominated by the fear from misinterpretation of their identity, see example below:

‘Of course I feel like passing out, when I’m not able to express myself in a foreign language the way I can in my mother tongue. And of course I feel and realize then that my

conversation companion doesn’t get the impression from me he would have, if I used my mother tongue.’

(Respondent No. 8)

However, when it comes to relationships, the minority, i. e. 44%, think their companion should also speak German. The majority thinks it sufficient, when their companions speak English or any other tongue they can both understand. Yet 83% hold the opinion that it is important to learn the mother tongue of their partner and 72% want or would want to their children speak German. It might be noted that 61% of our respondents live in a relationship with a non-German speaking partner. The reasons given for the importance of the children to master German were most frequently due to its advantages, such as the children can later on have better chances on the job market or have a conversation with their German speaking grandparents. Respondents who consider it important that their partner either speaks or learns also their mother tongue were predominantly female. Among their reasons was the believe that the language might: decrease the misunderstandings in the relationship, demonstrate respect and understanding for the other, enhance closeness (also due to similar social background) and enable a relationship that is not based only on physical attraction.

As discussed above, 56% don’t find it important for their partner to learn their mother tongue, but 83% believe it to be important for them to learn the mother tongue of their partner so that they could

learn something about their companion's culture. Here two of the replies we received to question (8):

'Yes, absolutely, that is the only way to truly understand the mentality and culture of a person!'

(Respondent No. 3)

'Yes, but only to learn something about the culture behind it. I think the culture can only be learned through the language. Everything else is just a try, but one will never be accepted by the culture as a part of it. Tamils talk with me about 'these white ones...', because they see me as a Tamil.'

(Respondent No. 2)

The first example shows that the awareness of the role the language(s) one speaks only becomes apparent when talking about other individuals. The comparison between the self and other is a crucial factor in investigations of identity. However it seems insufficient to enhance the subject's awareness of the role the language(s) he master play for himself. A double check on this phenomenon was made by question (11), which we asked as the penultimate question during our interviews ('To what extent does your mother tongue and other languages you use play a role in expressing your identity?'), when the majority of respondents still believed that their language skills have no influence on their identity or the way they are perceived by others.

In the second example our respondent No. 2 talks about being 'accepted by the culture', but what it means in reality is of course to be accepted by the people, who speak the language. Thus in this case we come across once again - the awareness language can play in social identity and self-categorization.

The majority, i. e. 78%, of the respondents do not prioritise meeting people who speak German and choose to spend their free time with people with similar interests and/or problems. Among the remaining 22% were respondents, who often came to Malaysia with poor proficiency in English, therefore sought people, who shared their mother tongue. Most of them remained good friends, while they also gained local or international friends throughout the years.

While 39% of the respondents heard that they changed their personality from their friends, question (10) a), 56% of them think of themselves to have changed, question (10) b). Looking at the data based on crosstabulation, 11 cases out of 18 match their identity perception with the perception of their identity by others. Another 5 cases are perceived by their friends as unchanged, although they themselves believe it to be otherwise and two cases thought the opposite. We take into account that the data set for this question is very subjective, since we have not the statements from the actual friends, but from the respondents responding on behalf of their friends. However most of the replies in terms of identity changes that we received can be interpreted as adaptation to Malaysian circumstances and expansion

of knowledge. Another feature we detected during the data analysis is perception in the change of personality. 5 subjects feel to have become more laid back and patient. On the contrary, respondents, who do not perceive changes in their personality expressed the opinion that their personality and identity is to a large extent conditioned by their inborn attributes.

‘To what extent does your mother tongue and other languages you use play a role in expressing your identity?’ was the penultimate question we asked, question No. (11) in this paper. As mentioned in the first paragraph of the data analysis, 83% of the respondents consider the language(s) they speak an important feature of their identity. Accordingly we were able to distinguish two main factors in the construal of their identity: as an expression of their personal identity and as a tool for the expression of their social identity. The latter expression varies with the level of their motivation to express their self-categorization as an in- or out- group member. Respondent No. 5 for example holds the opinion that the level of his language proficiency conditions the level of expression of his identity. He further believes that ‘the language skills are the keys to the world: the better the language skills, the more doors stand open.’ Similar views are held by some other respondents, one of them states:

‘My mother tongue is important for my identity, because only in that language I can search for various formulations in the most detailed

way possible and surprise people with them.’

(Respondent No. 5)

Viewing the mother tongue as a feature in common in terms of group memberships can be noted in the response of our interview partner No. 17.

‘One notices, how easy it goes, when one speaks a common language. What kind of appurtenance there can be thanks to language alone. How strong it can be, how much it can bring us together. One can survive with English well, pragmatically and rationally, but some things one can express only, one has to use his mother tongue and then other connections are made. I believe, it is simply like that. And then there are situations, when it becomes clearly apparent.’

The remaining 17% feel that their mother tongue doesn’t play any significant role in expressing their identity. They reasoned their opinions with the following statements: ‘The country of origin influences the way one is perceived by others. Germans are regarded as reliable. But that has nothing to do with the language’ (respondent No. 6). Respondent No. 10 believes that his mother tongue influences his identity in a very limited way, because he believes to express his identity and to perceive other’s identity via other features, such as ‘sex appeal’ and respondent No. 1 is

convinced that languages play no role in somebody's identity whatsoever: 'Words are not important at all. (*Wort ist Schall und Rauch.*)'.

The final point we addressed in our interviews was question No. (12) - Do you judge others by their language skills? When? How? In terms of frequency, we detected 83% of answers as 'yes' and the remaining 17% as 'no'. The replies to 'When?' were usually related to interaction with new people. The answers we gained to 'How?' can be basically divided into two categories: the level of interest for the communication partner and judgments about the intelligence of the communication partner. In the first case the respondents gain or lose interest for their communication partners based on the language skills their partners possess. In the latter case they evaluate the other on her/his mental ability based on the language proficiency. One respondent stated that she takes language very seriously most of all in the professional life: 'I won't start any business partnership with somebody unable to demonstrate good language skills, because I take that kind of person as incompetent'.

CONCLUSION

With our case studies we aimed to investigate the relationship between the language and identity among German mother tongue speakers living in Malaysia. We fall back on the Social Identity Theory and the Social Categorization Theory in regard to research on language and identity. Based on data

gained through a series of interviews we came to the conclusion that the use of a foreign language serves as a substitute for the mother tongue in the construal of identity only to a certain extent. This phenomenon becomes most apparent in situations where the competency of the language is crucial for the respondent involved in communication. Depending on the importance of the situation the respondents experience a different level of achievement/failure in expressing their identity. At the same time the respondents evaluate identity of their communication partner by rating their language skills. It means that our results support Joseph's (2004, p.13) and Spolsky's (1999, p.181) suggestion that individuals decode and evaluate the identity of others also based on language and thus perceive linguistic acts as acts of identity, what was suggested in the work by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985). The perception of one's own achieved/failed identity expression supports at the same time Pavlenko's and Blackledge's (2004, p.19) argument that identity choices are not possible in all situations. Our findings further show that the majority of our respondents don't feel well in situations when they can't understand the language others use around them. In this regard our results further indicate that the identity perception and expression is at the same time most apparent when accompanied by strong feelings (positive or negative). This is however an observation based on the overall evaluation of our data and since we did not explicitly ask about the intensity of the feelings our respondents experienced in

given situations, the matter requires further investigation. The fact that our respondents feel either good or bad when it comes to their comprehension and proficiency in a foreign language does nevertheless indicate a linkage between a personal and social identity that practically all researchers we mentioned in the literature review claim for the language to have. The linkage was reflected by the respondents when reporting also on their behaviour in such situations. We were not able to detect the length of stay in Malaysia as an influential factor for the identity perception of the respondents. A short/long term relationship with a non-German speaking partner also does not play an important part of the identity perception of the respondents. The mother tongue however becomes replaceable, provided the respondent gained the knowledge in a certain area in a foreign language. In this case, the individual will have difficulty to communicate about that particular area in his mother tongue except with practice. Nevertheless a broader study with a larger number of respondents could bring a better insight into these matters. We do not wish to propose that individuals' perceptions and expressions of identity are based solely on their language proficiency. Yet we wish to stress that in the case of our respondents the possibility to use the mother tongue as well as their level of foreign language proficiency and the level of language proficiency of their communication partners does play a significant role in the way they express and perceive identity.

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