A 1.2 Multilingualism and identity

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With and through our language(s), we express ourselves and make ourselves heard – our use of language is dialogical and tailored to the person with whom we are interacting. With and through our language(s), we relate to our fellow human beings and experience feelings of belonging. In other words, we can identify with specific groups – or distance ourselves from them – through our use of language. Our use of language can also be an indicator of difference; an indicator that is either intentional, as in teenage slang, or unintentional, as in the use of the "wrong" accent or "wrong" word. "Wrong" is something that is inappropriate, out of place or undesirable in a given context. The "wrong" language denies its speaker a hearing within the group. This is how Eva Hoffmann describes this experience and what it leads to in her autobiographical novel:

*Da ich nicht gehört werde, habe ich das Gefühl, dass ich nicht gesehen werde. Meine Worte scheinen andere oft zu verblüffen. Sie sind unangemessen oder gewollt oder einfach nur unverständlich. Die Menschen sehen mich verwundert an, sie murmeln irgendeine Antwort – irgend etwas Unpassendes ... der matte Blick in ihren Augen, mit dem sie mir zuhören, löscht mein Gesicht aus, verflacht meine Züge. ["Because I am not heard, I have the feeling that I am not seen. My words often seem to bewilder others. They are inappropriate or unnatural or simply incomprehensible. People look at me in amazement and mutter some response – something inappropriate... the dull look in their eyes as they listen to me deadens my face; flattens my features."] (Hoffman 2004, 188)*

The experience of being judged not suitable by others in one's use of language may be accompanied by the experience of shame – a feeling that, as Brigitta Busch writes, "im Zusammenhang mit Mehrsprachigkeit in Biografien oft erwähnt wird, [...]" ["is often mentioned in biographies in connection with multilingualism"] (Busch 2013, 26). Language use that the dominant group considers "wrong" can also have negative consequences and create experiences for the speakers, such as exclusion and discrimination if, for example, they are not granted a flat or a job or decisions as to their further education and training go against them.

Depending on the context, multilingualism can therefore be associated with emotionally challenging questions that may also take on an existential significance, such as:

* Can I express myself through language in the way I would like or in the way I imagine, or do I feel limited in my means of expression or even speechless?
* How do others react to my language(s)?
* Will I be accepted or rejected with my language(s)?
* As a multilingual person, will I be recognised as a legitimate speaker or will what I say be judged on the basis of a monolingual norm and deviations from that norm sanctioned?

In monolingual-centred contexts, being multilingual can also mean being subjected to national identity constructs that are apparently mutually exclusive. "Do you feel (more) Austrian or (more) XXX (Turkish, Hungarian, Slovakian...)?" In particular those people who have grown up with both languages as an unquestioned and integral part of their lives will often be at a loss when faced with this question. In the same way as multilinguals are not two monolinguals in one person, their experience of belonging to a particular (national) group cannot clearly be defined. Growing up multilingual not only means having a dynamic and complementary linguistic repertoire, it also means a wide range of possibilities in questions of belonging. Just as a person's multilingual repertoire is particular to them and represents more than the sum of the individual languages, the identities of people who have grown up or become multilingual are specific to them. Tarek Badawia (2002) researched the identities of young people who had been born in Germany to immigrant parents and had succeeded academically. He found that the young people could not be clearly classified or categorised and that they constructed their own "third stool", on which they "sat".

# Personal language (learning) biographies

When exploring the connection between multilingualism and identity, it is important to examine one's own language (learning) biography and take that as the starting point for individual theoretical and practical approaches to questions of language teaching and language acquisition. Such an approach is designed to prevent research from focusing solely on "others", on children or on parents, and to avoid merely talking "about" multilingual people.

Language portraits (Krumm/Jenkins 2001)[[1]](#footnote-1) are a striking demonstration that our linguistic repertoire is far more complex than common perception would have it. They reveal that our languages are closely linked to our life stories, and that not all languages that we consider a part of us are or have been so to the same extent at all points in our lives. Were we to produce a language portrait at regular intervals over the course of our lives, we would clearly see that our linguistic repertoire is constantly changing, that some of our languages become stronger or weaker, and that new ones are added and others seemingly lost. It would become obvious that our feelings about our different languages change depending on how they are connected to our lives at a given point in time. We would realise that our linguistic ability is not static or self-contained, but rather dynamic.

Language portraits can make inner and life-world multilingualism visible. They show that different languages are part of our life-world, regardless of whether and how well we master them and whether or not they are recognised languages. Language portraits can contain dialects or jargons as well as very personal codes such as "cat language" or paraverbal communication channels such as "music" or "body language". "Languages of longing" also appear in language portraits. These are the languages you like hearing, the ones with which you associate something special and the ones you would like to be able to talk.

# Bibliography and suggested reading

Badawia, Tarek (2002), *„Der dritte Stuhl“ – Eine Grounded-Theory-Studie zum kreativen Umgang bildungserfolgreicher Immigrantenjugendlicher mit kultureller Differenz.* Frankfurt a. M.

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Keim, Inken (2009), *Mehrsprachigkeit und sozial-kulturelle Identität: Migrantenjugendliche in Mannheim. Ergebnisse eines ethnografisch-soziolinguistischen Projekts.* Lecture slides. Available online at <https://www.okay-line.at/file/656/vortrainkenkeim.pdf>

Krumm, Hans-Jürgen/Eva-Maria Jenkins (2001), *Kinder und ihre Sprachen – Lebendige Mehrsprachigkeit*. Wien.

1. cf. A 4.2 Reflection on multilingualism and identity [↑](#footnote-ref-1)