

TUTORIAL  
**5.18**

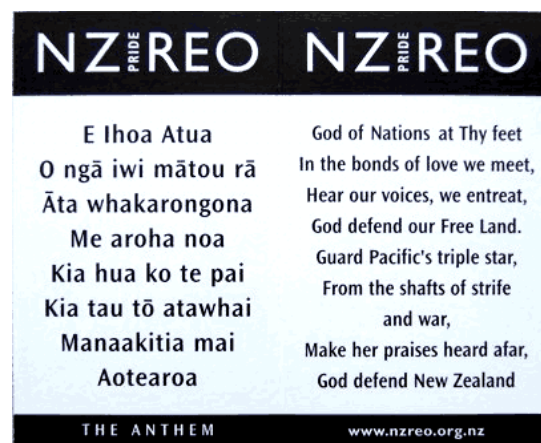
# Language and Identity

This tutorial looks at the relationship between language and identity. People have strong feelings about their language, and it is often linked to various other parts of their identity, such as their nation, ethnic group, religion and social class.

## Introduction

For those of us who come from a monolingual, English speaking background, language doesn't form a very conscious part of our identity. We don't think about the fact that we speak English (or a variety of English) very often. But for many people in the world, language is a very important part of their view of who they are. There are many multilingual communities around the world, where three or more languages are spoken by most people. In that situation, a person's primary language is a defining element of their personal identity and how others view them.

People have strong feelings about language, which is why there are numerous political battles involving language around the world. In many regions, smaller language groups are being 'absorbed' by larger languages/cultures around them. Some people groups, such as the Maori in New Zealand, have made an intense and very effective effort to make their language relevant and significant to younger generations of both Maori and non-Maori New Zealanders, because they see it as a key part of their identity as a people.



Our goal here is to discuss only some of the issues involved in the relationship between language and identity. It is a huge subject and one that many books have been written about. We will simply introduce some of the main ideas about the place that language has in the identity of a group and how it relates to other parts of their identity such as their ethnic group, nation, history,

culture, and religion. Thinking about language and identity should improve our view of who we are, in our eyes and in other people's, and it should deepen our understanding of social interaction.

## What is 'Identity'?

One way identity is sometimes defined is by categorizing people according to various criteria – ethnic origin, language, national origin, etc. But we are going to look at it from the point of view of *how people view themselves*, and particularly how their language relates to the view they have of themselves.

Most definitions of identity agree that it is something like: *an individual person feeling they are a part of a group*. That feeling is based on them sharing certain values with others in the group, and finding a sense of belonging there:

*“Self-identification commonly involves identifying with a specific group or community based on a range of criteria: racial, ethnic, cultural, social, etc.; self-identification necessarily involves imposing boundaries between groups and emphasizing one's belonging to one group rather than another; belonging to one group usually entails exclusion from another; self-identification also commonly involves emphasizing sameness or similarities between the individual and the group he self-identifies with on the one hand, and emphasizing the differences with other groups.”* (Rittner)

Some other descriptions that might help us to form a picture of what a identity is:

- a person recognizes himself as a member of one or more groups
- the person shares values and meanings associated with a group
- a person recognizes characteristics that they have in common with other members
- the person distinguishes himself from other people who do not share the group characteristics
- other members of the group recognize him as a member
- a group must see itself, and also be seen by other groups and individuals, as a distinct social entity
- some characteristics of the group may be thought of as more important than others - (core values or qualities)
- important characteristics or core values can differ depending on the situation: a characteristic becomes important if it can be seen as making a certain group distinct from other groups (skin color can be important in a multiracial society, while language can be an important feature in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society)

## Self identity and Group identity

In Western, 'global' cultures the relationship between individual identity and group identity is very complex and diverse. A person's deep, personal identity is made up mostly by the various group identities they also have. So, someone who identifies himself as 'an Australian' may have an individual identity that includes being from a family of Chinese ethnic origin, belonging to the medical profession, being a part of a local Chinese speaking church, being able to speak two or more languages, and belonging to a group that plays guitar on the weekends. There would be many other people who identify as 'Australians' who do not share many, or even any, specific aspects of his individual identity with him. So is 'Australian-ness' a meaningful identity?

In a broad and complex global culture, group identity *is* a very abstract concept, but it is interesting to note that people still display a strong need to self-identify with a particular group:

*"...it would appear logical that in the increasingly globalized world we live in, with its ever increasing levels of communication, and with the decreasing importance of state and geographical boundaries, this need for identifying with a particular group or place will gradually grow weaker. As it turns out, the opposite seems to be the case - it seems that with the disappearance of borders and boundaries and geographical distances, this need for identity grows stronger, and with the diminished significance of boundaries individuals look for other salient features that will help them establish a sense of belonging to a particular group; in this language continues to play a huge role.."*  
(Gibbons & Holt)

There are also many people groups in the world who are not greatly connected to the wider global culture, and who consequently have a much more concrete group identity which is tied in a large way to the unique languages they speak. They often have a cohesive view of who they are as a people group, and as individuals they find a much greater sense of belonging in their ethno-linguistic identity. For example, a person who calls himself an 'Ata' person (a people group in Papua New Guinea) would share a great number of individual identities with any other person who also calls themselves 'Ata'. But even for these types of people groups, in today's world there are



often pressures from 'outside' that have the potential to threaten or confuse their sense of identity - or in some cases to change it completely. Sometimes these are positive influences and sometimes not, but no matter how it turns out, the process of change in identity as a people group is often a stressful and challenging one.

*Above: Ata children learning to read and write their language.*

## Language and Identity

Anyone who writes about identity points out that while there are many aspects of a person's identity and many factors that can determine a person's identity - like ethnic, social or racial origin, culture, religion, education, professional occupation, family background, etc. - *language* is probably the most powerful instrument for constructing and expressing identity. People who speak the same heart language obviously have a much greater degree of shared common ground, common understanding and have the ability to develop a deeper relationship, so it follows that shared language is a primary way people identify with others. It is also a primary separating force between different groups.

Even *within* the same language community, we still use language to further identify a person. When we listen to someone speaking we are unconsciously evaluating and trying to identify 'who they are'. Do they have an accent? Are they from the city or the country? Are they well educated? Do they use certain words and not others? Speech is a very powerful factor in this identification process. When someone is talking, we are making social, cultural, and ethnic categorizations and value judgments based on their linguistic behavior. All of the levels of language (phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) affect our beliefs about, and evaluation of, the speaker.

We use language to exchange meaningful (and sometimes very complex and subtle) messages with other members of the same linguistic community, but we are also using language to tell the rest of the world about ourselves - to mark ourselves as similar to or different from other individuals, to show which group we belong to, or which we would like to belong to.

## Speech adjustment and identity

Speakers often make adjustments to their speech depending on who it is they are talking to - two of these types of adjustment are:

- *convergence* - speakers modify their speech in a way to make it more similar to the speech of the person they are speaking to (the most common type of adjustment)
- *divergence* - speakers make their speech dissimilar from the speech of the addressee

People use convergence to show solidarity and similarity with the person they are speaking to (which is based on a universal desire for approval). Divergence is much less common - an example would be an English middle-class Oxford

graduate emphasizing his Oxford accent when communicating with a speaker from a lower socio-economic status.

The factors which influence convergence or divergence are all about identity. People adjust their speech either because the participants in the conversation regard themselves as members of the same group, or one participant would *like* to be regarded as a member of the social group of the second participant, or perhaps the two participants represent groups which are in conflict.

## Dominant and subordinate language groups

In multilingual communities one language group is usually politically and economically the dominant one, and there are one or more subordinate language groups. The dominant language may be the *lingua franca* (language of business and trade), may even be an 'official' language of the country, or is the one that 'educated people' speak. So, in terms of linguistic behavior, the most typical pattern of speech adjustment is convergence from the minority language group to the dominant language group. For example, a Papua New Guinean who probably speaks three or four languages will use the most flawless English he is capable of with foreign English speakers, even if they both speak Tok Pisin (a PNG trade language) well. This is not surprising given that there are often real advantages in terms of power and/or living standards if people acquire a high level of competence in a second, more dominant language, one that is used in higher education, government offices and in business.

Many of those involved in minority language development projects - developing alphabets and written materials, in translation work or literacy program development - find that their first task is to motivate and encourage minority language speakers to value their language, and that it is a positive thing for them to have books in their language, and for them to learn to read and use their own language in new ways and for different reasons.

It is not always the case that a minority language is undervalued. Language is sometimes used as a powerful force to assert nationalism, such as with the Basque minority which strongly encourages all its members to learn and use the ethnic language of the Basque community to raise nationalistic self-awareness.



## Language and National Identity

A number of prominent historians, sociologists, and political scientists have argued that the existence of a national language is the primary foundation

upon which a national identity is built. But national identity is complex, because of the politics involved.

To take the example of the British Isles - for centuries their linguistic pattern was a patchwork of local dialects, Germanic or Celtic in origin. Only in modern times did individuals motivated by nationalistic ambitions of various kinds set about to establish 'languages' for the nations of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as for Cornwall and other smaller regions (which often constitute 'nations' in the eyes of their more fervent partisans). In the case of Scotland, two separate national languages emerged (Gaelic and Scots), and partisans of the two languages have focused much of their energies on combating the rival claims of the other, rather than arguing against the wide use of English. The vast majority of Scots consider the strategic economic value of using a world language (English) as greatly outweighing the political, cultural, and sentimental value of the 'heritage' languages. The struggle between Gaelic and Scots continues, but English is the accepted dominant language.

## Language and Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is sometimes used as a synonym of national identity, but it is helpful to make a distinction:

- *Ethnic* identity is focused more on common descent (common ancestors and a common history) and on a cultural heritage shared because of common descent rather than on political factors (like borders, currencies, governments, etc.).
- *National* identity is focused on political borders and autonomy from other nations.

There are many people groups in the world today who share an *ethnic* identity - but who geographically live across the borders of different nations. This situation is quite common in the world today, but particularly in Asia and Africa. In South East Asia, many groups who are part of one ethnic people group live in several different nations. Many of these people may also speak the dominant language of the nations in which they live, but their *primary* identity would be with their people group in which they share a heart language and cultural heritage.

The chart below describes the distribution of the people who would identify themselves as "Lahu" people - who all speak the Lahu language but live in five different nations just in South East Asia. The Lahu girls pictured live in the USA.





By Country	Population	Primary Language
China	516,000	Lahu
Laos	2,900	Lahu
Myanmar	147,000	Lahu
Thailand	34,000	Lahu
Vietnam	7,800	Lahu

Many ethnic people groups are even more widely distributed, such as the HmongNjua:

By Country	Population	Primary Language
China	51,000	HmongNjua
France	124,000	HmongNjua
French Guiana	3,400	HmongNjua
Laos	196,000	HmongNjua
Suriname	2,000	HmongNjua
Thailand	43,000	HmongNjua
United States	107,000	HmongNjua
Vietnam	Unknown	HmongNjua

## Language and Religious Identity

Language (or a part of a language, such as an alphabet) can also be a marker or symbol of religious identity. (When we refer to *Christianity* in the paragraph below, it is as an official religion, not necessarily the true Church).

Christian Europe used Latin, the Islamic world uses Arabic, and the Jewish people use Hebrew, all because of their religious identity. When Christianity underwent an East-West split, the use of Latin (as opposed to Greek) became its most potent symbol. The groups of Christians within the western Asian lands ruled by Muslims identified themselves by the languages of Syriac, Chaldean, and other languages.

Jewish communities living in Europe used Hebrew loan words, which distinguished their speech from that of other German and Spanish speakers. Religious splits in Islam came to be associated with dialectal differences in Arabic. Language was often thought of, or used, to reinforce the difference between one religious group and another. Members of the various



religious groups needed and wanted to be able to recognise one another, and to identify members of other groups. Language was, and continues to be, an important part of religious identity.

## Alphabets and official languages

Language is such an important part of identity, that even the alphabet people use can become a controversial and divisive issue. This is because the preference of one alphabet over another is often tied to a religious or social identity or a tradition. Countries who choose the Arabic alphabet often do so because it expresses an ideology -

*“It is natural that the alphabet in which the Qur’an was written should become an integral part of a vision of the world: an external manifestation of belonging to the Ummah, the Islamic community. Countries opting for it would thereby declare their Islamic identity, and its use would amount, accordingly, to a form of confession of faith.”* (Hegyi)



In China, where unity is a key issue in such a large and diverse country, the Chinese script has been seen for generations as a unifying force. This same script is used for many separate spoken languages or dialects.

*“Orthographic battles are common in situations ‘where identity and nationhood are under negotiation’; this is because ‘orthographic systems cannot be conceptualized simply as reducing speech to writing but rather ... are symbols that carry historical, cultural, and politicized meanings.’* (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:64)

There are many other examples that illustrate the fact that language and identity are inseparable - too many to cover in this tutorial. For example, in quite a few places, the language used for street signs has been the cause for conflict or even violence. Many countries have officially recognized languages, or language laws relating to the language of education and government, but these decisions are not easy to make. Among the other language speakers of India, the decision to choose Hindi as the official language was seen as an attempt to erase their cultures, and today there are 18 official Indian languages - but the controversy continues today because some languages have a higher status or profile than others.





## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Language and identity*

1. Does your language or dialect affect your identity? In what ways?
2. Do you identify others in your community by the way they speak? How?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Language and identity*

1. Choose one of the languages other than English that is spoken in Australia.

Research the linguistic community you chose - where are they located in Australia, do they have community groups, cultural activities, or is there any indication you can find that they identify (within the broader Australian society) with their separate cultural identity? Find out where else in the world that language is spoken and how many speakers there are. Try to find a member of that community and talk to them about language and identity issues.