How linguistic and cultural identities are affected by migration

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Abstract

The political and economic situation in Brazil in the 1980s led many Brazilians to seek a better life abroad, and England has become one of the countries in Europe with a high concentration of Brazilian immigrants. Although there are several studies on minority communities in the UK, the Brazilian community has been understudied, especially in relation to issues of language. In this article, I examine the self-identity of three Brazilian mothers living in London and explore the views they hold on language and identity. The data, which are part of a larger study (see Souza 2006), suggests that the mothers’ identity is strongly affected by their cultural experiences in both their countries of origin and of immigration as well as by their linguistic experiences with their mother tongue (Brazilian Portuguese) and the local language (British English).

Introduction

I immigrated to the UK in my late 20s and have been living here for the last 10 years. While in the UK, I felt the need to keep in touch with people who shared my cultural background and so got involved in the teaching of Brazilian Portuguese to children of Brazilian mothers. Spending time with the mothers and their children made me ask questions about the relationship between language and identity among this group of fellow immigrants. I then started a doctoral study on how identity influences the language choice of a group of Brazilian mothers and their children who are growing up in London.

In this article I report on the data provided by the mothers only and focus on the following questions:

- What are the factors influencing the self-identity of a group of Brazilian mothers living in the UK?
- How do they see themselves?
- How significant is their ethnic background in their conception of themselves?
- What is the relative importance of different components of social identity (e.g. ethnicity and language) in their self-image?
Minority identity

Tajfel’s (1978) Theory of Social Identity focuses on how members of different minority groups relate to the majority when in contact, and categorises members of minorities into three groups:

a) Those who wish to assimilate into the majority, but may fail because of barriers raised by the majority;
b) Those who choose to give up some of their original cultural, historical, and social characteristics which mark them out but, at the same time, retain some of their particular features;
c) Those who put pressure on members of the minority group who try to assimilate into the majority.

It is possible to trace a parallel between the three types of minorities identified by Tajfel and the ones presented by Hannerz (2000): (1) going ‘native’, (2) remaining ‘tourists’, or (3) becoming ‘cosmopolitans’. The minority group members who go ‘native’ are the ones who wish to be part of the majority group. The ‘tourists’ are the members who are against assimilation and therefore maintain superficial contacts with the host culture.

Both Tajfel and Hannerz recognise that there is a third category of individuals. Tajfel refers to this intermediary group as the people who give up some of the qualities which make them different from the majority group but also retain some of their original characteristics, thus assimilating but also keeping a sense of being different. Hannerz’s (2000: 104–105) ‘cosmopolitans’ are similar in that they are individuals who manage to participate in the majority group without being readily identifiable as not belonging due to their involvement with a plurality of different cultures. Block (2002: 3) subdivides Hannerz’s cosmopolitan way of relating to the culture of the majority society into two types: ‘early cosmopolitans’ (individuals who move to a foreign culture at a very young age and are expected to adapt to the local society) and ‘expatriate cosmopolitans’ (adults who have chosen to live abroad for a period of time, and who choose to get involved in the local society).

I recognise the usefulness of the categories discussed above in investigating identity and draw on them in the analysis below. However, I propose that the framework for investigating the possible kinds of identity (i.e. the positions one occupies in a social context) be presented as part of a continuum. At the extremes and at the opposing ends of the continuum are the minority members who reject involvement in the majority society (the ‘tourists’) and the ones who seek to assimilate into the majority group (the ‘natives’). In between the ‘tourists’ and the ‘natives’ are the ones who are willing to adopt some of the characteristics from both the majority and the minority groups (the ‘cosmopolitans’). The notion of a continuum is important in that it allows for the visualisation of the fact that these identifications are not static and can move along between the two extremes. In other words, people’s identity changes depending on the social context in which the individuals function at a certain time and place, a reality experienced by multilingual individuals in time of globalisation (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004b: 5).

The concept of identity I adopt in this paper reflects a combination of contributions from both social psychology and post-structuralism, where identity is
viewed as the way individuals see themselves linked, in terms of knowledge and emotions, to certain structures in society. In other words, when discussing identity, we always discuss social identity which, in turn, refers to a variety of components such as religion, dress, class, gender, nationality, age, profession, language and ethnicity. In this sense, ethnic identity is only one aspect of social identity which changes in time and space and also in relation to the importance of other aspects of social identity as a consequence of different contexts. The significance of each of the markers of ethnicity may vary from group to group (Fishman 1989: 38). Having said that, I argue that language seems to be essential to the maintenance of group identity in the case of these Brazilian mothers. Furthermore, 'the apparently monolithic or generalised character of ethnicity at the collective level (...) does not pre-empt the continual reconstruction of ethnicity at a personal level' (Cohen 2001: 120). It is this personal level of reconstruction of ethnicity on which I focus in this article.

**Self-identity of a group of Brazilian mothers in the UK**

I examined the influence of factors such as social/economic success, contact with the community/homeland, and language attitudes/domains (Baker 2001) on the participants’ choice of languages. Thirteen Brazilian women were interviewed individually. As all of them referred to identity as a factor which plays a major role in their choice of languages, I aimed at a better understanding of their positioning in relation to language and identity, and explored the ways in which they construct their identities and the components these identities have. These issues were examined through a second set of qualitative interviews which were carried out in groups. I used the four types of identification (see above) as general descriptions of the mothers’ self-identity and considered how these identifications might change in the direction of either extreme of the identity continuum. The changes in identification result from the interaction between the mothers’ characteristics and the meanings they attach to these characteristics according to the different social situations in which they are involved (see Fishman 1989). It means that I selected a general term to refer to these mothers based on the social profiles they provided in their interviews, despite being aware of the fact that their identities might vary in different social contexts.

I restrict this article to the self-identity of the three mothers whose children attended a Brazilian community language school for the longest period of time: Dorotéa, Durvalina and Aparecida.

**Dorotéa, the ‘tourist’**

Dorotéa moved to England due to her job. She was already an adult then but did not speak English at all. She spent a couple of years in London working with a group of Brazilians and then decided to settle in the UK.

Dorotéa found it difficult to pinpoint what makes her Brazilian. All she could mention was the fact of feeling Brazilian. Dorotéa's difficulties in talking about her own ethnicity could be a result of her lack of involvement with the major-
ity society as she works, lives and socialises with Brazilians. She considers speaking her mother tongue important. She has emotional links to Brazilian Portuguese and instrumental links to English. According to Dorotéa, she only uses English in situations where she has no choice, such as going to the GP and dealing with her daughter’s school. She does not relate to English people and deliberately avoids any involvement with them.

In summary, Dorotéa has a superficial relationship with English society, which she sees as ‘a necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible’ (Hannerz 2000: 106) and to which she travelled ‘for the purpose of “home plus”’ (Hannerz 2000: 104–105). Interestingly, however, Dorotéa has had limited access to education and financial resources in Brazil and does not consider returning to live there since she enjoys a better life in London, and most importantly, she can offer a better life to her child as well.

**Durvalina, the ‘expatriate cosmopolitan’**

Durvalina moved to England as an adult with the purpose of learning English and, in contrast to Dorotéa, has forged a closer link with English society. According to Block’s (2002) description, Durvalina tends to move towards the left centre of the identity continuum and could be described as an ‘expatriate cosmopolitan’. She recognises that the local community influences her and that she has to adapt to it. The main reason for her integration into British society is her child. As a result, she has acquired some characteristics of the majority society but still feels and behaves as a Brazilian. The ‘otherness’ reinforces her Brazilian identity.

Durvalina considers Portuguese important in expressing herself and her feelings, and values her socio-cultural experiences in Brazil. However, she avoids any of the Brazilian features she sees as negative and considers it important to be part of British society. This is the ‘kind of cosmopolitanism where the individual picks from other cultures only those pieces which suit [them]’ (Hannerz 2000:103). The importance of being part of British society for Durvalina is related to her son being English. Although she wants her son to speak Portuguese and to know things about Brazil, she believes that his experience in England will influence him differently. Thus, in the same way as she wants him to be aware of her reality as a Brazilian person, she wants to be part of her son’s life by being involved with the society where he is growing up.

**Aparecida, the ‘early cosmopolitan’**

Aparecida tends towards the centre right of the identity continuum, and could be described as an ‘early cosmopolitan’ since she came to England as a child (see Block 2002). When she moved to England with her family she did not speak English but quickly adapted to the new country, its language and customs.

Being aware of the fact that some English behaviour is different from the way she behaves, Aparecida likes telling people that she is Brazilian. This way, the difference is dealt with explicitly. She reports feeling Brazilian as a consequence of the way she believes a family should function and the way she relates to children. Like Durvalina, Aparecida has her feelings of being
Brazilians reinforced by comparing her behaviour to what is considered English behaviour. Although Hannerz (2000: 105) claims that cosmopolitans do not want to be too readily identifiable among locals, Aparecida seems to need to remind herself and others that although she has embraced English culture, she ‘know[s] where the exit is’ (Hannerz 2000: 103). She is taken for English due to her physical appearance and the fact that her English is as good as a native speaker’s. Nevertheless, Aparecida feels strongly about her Brazilian identity and makes conscious efforts to be involved with the Brazilian community both in England and Brazil. As a result, she fits into Tajfel’s (1978) third type of inter-group relations: the one which opts for giving up some of their cultural, historical and social features which make them appear to be different from the majority while at the same time retaining some of their special characteristics in order to maintain some sense of psychological distinctiveness.

**Discussion**

Pergar-Kuscer and Prosen (2005: 9) argue that the importance of interactions with others lies in identity being the result of a social process, where individual characteristics are shaped according to the experiences one has in interaction with others. The fact that the Brazilian women in this research immigrated to London and entered a new social context made them reflect and redefine their social identity, a process common to many immigrants (Ang 2001: 4).

The interviews with the mothers indicated that there are two forces working on the formation of their identity: their socio-cultural experiences in Brazil and their socio-cultural experiences in England. Therefore, the mothers’ age at the time they immigrated and the purpose of their immigration seem to influence the strength of their links with Brazil and their openness in relating to British society. The links the mothers hold with their homeland and their speech community in London result from their needs of being in touch with their linguistic and cultural ‘roots’. These contacts with Brazil and the Brazilian community in London seemed to imply that emotional and cultural aspects are more important to language and identity issues of these families than the search for socio-economic success in the majority community.

Economically and educationally speaking, the social backgrounds of these families are very different. However, these families are linked to each other by the importance the mothers give to the Brazilian Portuguese language in the construction of their identities. They are also connected by their efforts in promoting their mother tongue to their children. This effort to maintain the use of their mother tongue with their children was also reported by the mothers of Pakistani origin in Mills’ (2004) study, which focuses ‘on what makes someone identify with a mother tongue and what that reveals of their sense of self’ (Mills 2004: 162).

Being born in Brazil and speaking Brazilian Portuguese as their first language allows the mothers in my study to see themselves as Brazilians. This identity is then affected in different degrees by the age at which they moved to England and learnt to speak English. This new identity, which results from the interaction between their experiences in growing up in Brazil (X1) and speaking Portuguese (X2) and their experiences in England (Y1) and speaking English (Y2), is what I call (X + ) a hybrid identity. It is important to note, however, that
there is variety in the way in which the mothers get involved with the country in which they have decided to settle. The mothers' self-identification depends on how much their 'Brazilianess' is affected by the 'Englishness' of their experiences of living in London in different situations and at different times.

Some implications

The data in this study are suggestive of the work by other researchers (e.g. Harris 2004; Dicker 2006) which describes how globalisation has affected the formation of identities and tends to create a new and 'hybrid' sense of ethnic identity. It means that although interacting with the majority society is important, it is also beneficial for these mothers' emotional well-being to be able to speak their first language among themselves and with their children, a need that should be acknowledged by the people around them and by the society at large as well.

In the context of ESOL, the implication is that teachers should ensure that they overtly explore the characteristics of their students' identities as well as the meanings they attach to these characteristics in order to promote positive feelings of identity. As stated by Macpherson (2005: 604), '[t]he greatest gift (...) education can offer is (...) the resources to exercise informed linguistic and cultural choices'.

References

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