

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE IDENTITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

## МОВА ТА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ: ВЗАЄМОДІЯ МІЖ ПЕРШОЮ ТА ДРУГОЮ МОВНОЮ ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЮ У ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ

*The paper explores the complex interplay between first language (L1) and second language (L2) identities in the process of foreign language learning, with a focus on Ukrainian learners of English. Drawing on sociocultural theory, poststructuralist theory of identity, and the concept of the multilingual subject, the study argues that language identity is not static but negotiated and dynamic. The first language identity shapes the interpretative frameworks and cultural lenses through which they understand L2, while L2 identity evolves as learners engage with new communicative norms, new cultural environment, and emotional experiences.*

*Adapting to a foreign language environment often requires overcoming psychological barriers and being open to new cultural influences. Some individuals may resist integrating L2 cultural elements out of fear of losing their L1 identity, while others might distance themselves from their native culture to seek social mobility or assimilation. Ukrainian learners of English, navigating the linguistic space between Ukrainian and English, encounter moments of internal dialogue and cultural tension. Grammar-based misunderstandings, etiquette-based miscommunications, and cultural gaps exemplify the real-life consequences of divergent language identities.*

*Through conscious engagement with L2 cultural contexts and identity reflection, learners may achieve greater language fluency in their learning. By recognizing the role of identity in language acquisition, both educators and learners can better navigate the emotional and social aspects of learning a foreign language, leading to more meaningful and effective educational outcomes.*

*The paper advocates for pedagogical approaches that integrate language identity development and emotional awareness to enhance SLA outcomes.*

**Key words:** second language identity, first language identity, sociocultural theory, intercultural communication, language acquisition, communicative misunderstanding.

*Стаття досліджує складну взаємодію між першою мовною (L1) і другою мовною (L2)*

*ідентичністю в процесі вивчення іноземної мови, акцентуючи увагу на вивченні англійської мови українцями. Спираючись на соціокультурну теорію, постструктуралістські теорії ідентичності та концепцію багатомовного суб'єкта, дослідження стверджує, що мовна ідентичність не є статичною, а узгодженою та динамічною. L1 формує рамки інтерпретації та культурне тло, через які сприймається L2, тоді як ідентичність L2 розвивається тоді, коли особистість взаємодіє з новими комунікативними нормами, культурним середовищем та емоційним досвідом.*

*Адаптація до іномовного середовища часто вимагає подолання психологічних бар'єрів і відкритості до нових культурних впливів. Деякі люди можуть чинити опір інтеграції культурних елементів L2 через страх втратити свою ідентичність L1, тоді як інші можуть дистанціюватися від рідної культури у пошуках соціальної мобільності чи асиміляції.*

*Українці, які вивчають англійську, мігруючи у мовному просторі між рідною та англійською мовами, стикаються з моментами внутрішнього діалогу та культурної напруги. Непорозуміння, що виникають через відмінності у граматичній структурі двох мов, незнання норм спілкування та культурні лакуни, ілюструють реальні наслідки розбіжностей мовних ідентичностей. Через усвідомлене залучення до культурного контексту L2 і віддзеркалення L2 ідентичності можна досягти кращого оволодіння іноземною мовою.*

*Визнаючи роль ідентичності в засвоєнні мови, як педагоги і учні можуть краще орієнтуватися в емоційних і соціальних аспектах вивчення іноземної мови, що сприяє більш значущим і ефективним результатам навчання. Педагогічні методики, які поєднують розвиток мовної ідентичності та емоційної обізнаності, є перспективними підходами в покращенні результатів SLA.*

**Ключові слова:** друга мовна ідентичність, перша мовна ідентичність, соціокультурна теорія, міжкультурна комунікація, засвоєння мови, комунікативне непорозуміння.

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**Lazor N.V.,**

Senior Lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, Bioethics and Foreign Languages  
Odessa National Medical University

**Mokriienko E.M.,**

Senior Lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, Bioethics and Foreign Languages  
Odessa National Medical University

**Introduction.** Stating the problem. Language is more than just a tool for communication – it is a profound and multifaceted expression of identity. When people begin to learn another language, they find themselves as though they are in a room of distorting mirrors, where familiar images seem strange and unlike their usual reflections. As individuals acquire a second language (L2), they undergo shifts not only in linguistic competence but also in self-perception and social belonging. In the context of globalization and increasing multilingualism, the issue of second language identity formation has become central to contemporary second language acquisition (SLA) research. Concepts of first language identity (L1

identity) and second language identity (L2 identity) are essential for understanding how language learners navigate their cultural, emotional, and psychological transformations. Ukrainian learners of English, in particular, face not only a different linguistic system (the absence of grammatical gender and cases, the presence of articles and a developed system of verb tenses, etc.), but also a complex negotiation of identity due to the cultural, historical, and political influences associated with English as a global language. While acquiring a second language, they undergo a significant psychological and sociocultural transformation, being permanently involved in the dialogue between their native (Ukrainian) and their target language (English).

This paper examines the impact of L1 identity on the development of L2 identity and considers how a deeper understanding of L2 identity can enhance performance in foreign language learning and promote personal and professional development.

Analysis of the research and publications on the issue under consideration. The conceptual framework for this study is based on the sociocultural theory by J. P. Lantolf and S. L. Thorne [6], poststructuralist identity theory as proposed by B. Norton [8], and the idea of the multilingual subject articulated by C. Kramsch [5]. These perspectives reject the notion of identity as fixed, emphasizing instead its fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent nature. For example, Norton defines identity as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relation is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" [9, p. 4].

D. Block argues that language learning involves shifts in identity, especially when learners must navigate new cultural discourses [2]. B. Norton expands on this by introducing the concept of 'investment,' which suggests that learners' motivation to acquire a language is influenced by their perceived access to power and cultural capital. C. Kramsch [5] introduces the concept of the multilingual subject, focusing on the inner dialogue between languages that reveals the subjective, emotional side of SLA.

A series of studies explores how Ukrainian learners specifically negotiate these internal dialogues. Ukrainian scholars commonly use the concept of *linguistic personality (primary linguistic personality, secondary linguistic personality, etc.)*, which has characteristics quite close to those of language identity. Ye. Borynshtein defines linguistic personality as "a personality characterized by the influence of the linguistic culture they have acquired on their personal qualities and their sociocultural effectiveness as a subject of social relations" (our translation – L.N., M.E.) [12, p. 66]. Yu. Zhyhalkina studies secondary linguistic personality in the context of intercultural communication as "a set of human traits that involve mastering the verbal-semantic code of another language, that is, the linguistic picture of the world and the conceptual picture of the world, which enables a person to understand a new social reality" (our translation – L. N., M. E.) [13, p. 37]. This definition suggests that a linguistic personality engages with a foreign linguistic and social conceptual system. However, there is a lack of empirical data on how learners integrate or resist English-language identities and how this integration influences their language acquisition outcomes.

The purpose of the article is to study how second language identity develops through an internal dialogue between a first language (L1) and second language (L2) of an individual and examine how a

deeper understanding of L2 identity can enhance performance in foreign language learning and promote personal and professional development.

#### **Presentation of the main material and results.**

First language identity refers to the internalized sense of self that individuals develop in connection with their native language. This identity is closely associated with personal cultural heritage, early social experiences, and community norms. Norton asserts that language is not simply a means of communication but also a *site of identity construction*, highlighting the centrality of language to how people perceive themselves and are perceived by others [8].

Second language identity develops as individuals engage with new linguistic and cultural environments. Pavlenko and Lantolf describe second language (L2) identity as a dynamic and evolving construct formed through participation in contexts where a second language is used [10]. Learners may adopt new ways of thinking, behaving, and expressing themselves, different from those shaped by their first language (L1). According to Pavlenko and Lantolf, proficient bilinguals are able to use either their L1 or L2 in the processes of inner verbal thinking equally well. However, L2 identity formation is often complex and characterized by tension (up to internal conflicts), adaptation, and transformation.

For Ukrainian learners of English, this transformation may involve navigating moments of tension and harmony between the values, expressions, and linguistic conceptualization of the world in both languages. For example, consider a Ukrainian student writing a reflective journal in English: the linguistic structures may limit their emotional expression, yet at the same time, they may provide new conceptual tools that are not available in Ukrainian, and vice versa. Another possible scenario: a student can write in a language that is perfect in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but their text will be alien to native speakers since the linguistic conceptualization of the world (Ukrainian scholars commonly use the notion of a *linguistic picture of the world*) is a much broader phenomenon than the exact reproduction of the lexical and grammatical structure of another language.

This experience creates a space for inner dialogue – a cognitive and affective conversation between the self as a Ukrainian speaker and the emerging self as an English user. In her exploration, Kramsch discusses "... the often-recurring reference to Self and Other in the testimonies of language learners. These learners are conscious of learning not just another code but the language of the Other. What is their relationship to this Other?" [4, p. 108]. In many cases, learners describe feeling as if they are a *different person* when speaking English – more confident, more reserved, or more expressive – highlighting the impact of sociocultural context on self-perception [5].

Using dynamic assessment, as proposed by Lantolf and Thorne [6], educators can identify moments of identity transformation in students. For example, when a Ukrainian student discusses a politically charged topic in English, their choice of words, approach to analyzing events, opinions, and value judgments not only reflect their language proficiency (it can even be comparable to that of native speakers) but also indicate their alignment with or resistance to cultural narratives. These instances highlight that identity negotiation can either foster growth or create conflict, depending on the individual's environment and available support systems.

We have observed that Ukrainian learners who actively engage with the cultural nuances of English often develop more fluid and integrated language identities and overall adaptability skills. Those encouraged to reflect on their multilingual experiences report higher motivation and better language retention, reinforcing the importance of affective engagement in second language acquisition (SLA).

**The Influence of First Language Identity on Second Language Identity.** The relationship between the first language (L1) identity and a second language (L2) identity is complex and dynamic, influenced by sociocultural, psychological, and contextual factors. The impact of L1 identity on L2 identity can manifest in several ways.

Firstly, L1 identity provides a cultural and cognitive framework that shapes how learners interpret and respond to L2 norms. For example, speakers from collectivist cultures may find it challenging to adapt to the individualistic communication styles often associated with English. This misalignment can lead to discomfort when expressing emotions or opinions [5]. For example, the Ukrainians may be perceived as rude by native English speakers because they do not use "please" and "thank you" as frequently as English speakers do. Conversely, the politeness of English speakers can seem insincere to Ukrainian native speakers. Such cultural differences can either hinder or enrich the development of an L2 identity, depending on an individual's openness and adaptability.

Secondly, learners' attachment to their L1 identity can significantly affect their motivation to adopt L2 norms. Adapting to a foreign language environment often requires overcoming psychological barriers and being open to new cultural influences, which is a crucial stage in developing a new language identity. Some individuals may resist integrating L2 cultural elements out of fear of losing their L1 identity, while others might distance themselves from their native culture to seek social mobility or assimilation. It is not uncommon for immigrants who have lived in a foreign environment for a long time and hardly speak a word of the language of their current place of residence. On the other hand, for many immigrants, their native

language almost loses its significance as a means of communication, even while communicating with family members. Notably, Norton observes that immigrant youth frequently navigate dual allegiances, resulting in hybrid identities that blend aspects of both linguistic cultures [9].

Thirdly, the negotiation between L1 and L2 identities can result in code-switching and the emergence of new linguistic practices. In bilingual communities, the blending of languages, such as *Spanglish* (mixed Spanish-English), *Chinglish* (mixed Chinese-English), or *Ukish* (mixed Ukrainian-English in Canada [3]), can become a meaningful expression of identity in its own right. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" [1] articulates how individuals create hybrid cultural identities that transcend the binary of native versus foreign.

**Understanding Second Language Identity in Enhancing Language Learning.** Recognizing the role of identity in language learning can significantly improve foreign language pedagogy and learner outcomes. Understanding L2 identity facilitates a deeper engagement with the language and its cultural context, which promotes motivation, retention, and performance.

L2 identity never fully agrees with the language identity of a native speaker. Sometimes, this is communication between people who are very far from each other in terms of communicative etiquette and communicative behavior models, leading to misunderstanding, conflict situations, and, ultimately, culture shock. Awareness of this gap can demotivate the student and impair learning performance. However, it seems feasible to bring L2 identity as close as possible to understanding the language identity of the native speaker.

Misalignment between a Ukrainian learner of English and an English native speaker is quite common. Here are some examples:

**Etiquette-based miscommunication.** If a Ukrainian learner says during a business meeting, "Give me the document," an English speaker may feel this is abrupt or even rude. In Ukrainian, direct speech is more common and not necessarily impolite. Translating commands directly into English (without softening them with "Could you please," "Would you mind," or adding a polite tone) may come off as impolite to native English speakers, who often use indirect language for requests as a form of etiquette.

**Culture-based misunderstanding.** Another common cultural misunderstanding arises when an English speaker casually asks, "How are you?" A Ukrainian learner may respond with an honest answer, such as, "Not very well; I had a bad day, and my head hurts." The English speaker might feel awkward or surprised, as in English-speaking cultures, "How are you?" is typically a ritualized greeting rather than a literal inquiry. Many English speakers expect a



short, positive reply like "Good, thanks." In contrast, within Ukrainian culture, if someone asks how you are, it is often interpreted as a sincere question deserving an honest response. This difference can lead to discomfort or social awkwardness. Regarding understanding the Other language identity, a comment of the native British English coach, Joe Simpson (@englishwithjoes/Instagram), is very noteworthy. Explaining to a subscriber why the usual answer "I'm fine" to the question "How are you?" can be perceived by a native speaker in a completely ambiguous way, he writes, "... being fluent is not about your vocabulary or grammar, it's about really understanding the mentality of natives."

*Grammar-based misunderstandings.* Misunderstanding the grammatical structure of a second language can lead to a distortion of meaning when transmitting information. In some cases, it may even convey the opposite meaning. A relevant paper by P. Shopin analyzes cases of this phenomenon in translations of popular articles from English into Ukrainian made by his students [11]. The researcher examines various oppositions such as causation, quality, modality, time, space, quantity, and grammatical gender. Although the aim of this article is a semantic-grammatical analysis of translation errors, some mistakes arise from perceiving a foreign language through the lens of the native language's grammar.

When mastering a foreign language, it is essential to develop a second language (L2) identity that aligns with the language identity of a typical educated native speaker, which entails creating an active L2 identity that allows for effective communication with native speakers by minimizing conflicts related to language identities or sociocultural differences.

A key concept in this process is "investment," introduced by Norton [7]. This concept frames motivation not just as an individual trait but as a learner's commitment to achieving a desired future identity. When learners recognize that acquiring an L2 can help them reach meaningful goals, such as securing employment, access to education, or participating in a global community, they are more likely to invest effort in their language learning. Kramsch points out that "in the North American context, investment in SLA has become synonymous with 'language learning commitment' and is based on a learner's intentional choice and desire." [5, p. 195]

Additionally, fostering a positive L2 identity can help reduce anxiety, eliminate fear of language failure, encourage participation in the classroom, and create a friendly learning environment. Language learning often involves vulnerability, and learners who feel safe to explore new identities are more willing to take linguistic risks. For example, role-playing allows students to experiment with different characters and communication styles, relieving the pressure to

conform to norms based on their native language (L1) and its associated cultural background and behavior patterns.

Finally, understanding the fluid nature of identity can help educators promote intercultural competence. Learners who reflect on how their identity shifts in L2 contexts become more empathetic and better equipped to navigate diverse cultural situations, and their adaptability skills develop more actively. They become more open and willing to take on new language challenges. This awareness not only aids language learning but also contributes to broader social integration and personal growth.

Conclusions. Language identity encompasses not only a set of language skills but also a range of communicative strategies and cultural features that shape an individual's communication style. Consequently, the development of a second language identity is fundamentally an internal dialogue between different linguistic and cultural frameworks.

First and second language identities are deeply interconnected, influencing how individuals experience, acquire, and use native and foreign languages. The first language (L1) identity provides a foundational perspective through which learners interpret new linguistic experiences, while the second language (L2) identity reflects an evolving sense of self-formation through cross-cultural interactions and personal aspirations. By recognizing the role of identity in language acquisition, both educators and learners can better navigate the emotional and social aspects of learning a foreign language, leading to more meaningful and effective learning outcomes.

Future research could focus on longitudinal case studies involving Ukrainian-English bilinguals in Ukraine and abroad (diaspora) or examine the role of digital environments in identity negotiation. It seems interesting to study the peculiarities of the formation of the second language personality in different age groups. Additionally, there is potential to apply this framework of internal dialogue to language learning apps or AI-based tutors that adapt to the developmental stages of a learner's identity.

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