

IDENTITY, POLITICS AND LANGUAGE

Liliana ALIC

Faculty of Letters, Transilvania University, Brasov, Romania

Abstract: *Languages have various phrases, frozen or not, to express identity, whether we speak about national, social, ethnic or professional identity. Those phrases reflect the general opinion and view on events, facts, communities or behaviour which are currently attributed to a certain group of people. Of all marks of national identity, language is the one that can be easily transferred, borrowed or willingly transmitted around for the purpose of reaching several communities and unifying them. Human intelligence and inventiveness have just created the tool to achieve this purpose: mass media. We intend to analyze how two television channels, TV 5 Monde and BBC International, reflect French and British values among French and English speakers around the world throughout their programmes. The two channels have similar contents and they both reflect the way national identity is confronted with international identity. Two programmes are particularly interesting from this point of view, Kiosque, on TV5 Monde and Dateline, on BBC International, because they gather journalists of various nationalities who discuss international issues. The journalists invited as guests on a television programme have a very good knowledge of French and English but they do not give up, forget or deny their national origin. Some of their words or phrases betray their ethnic origin or their national belonging, as well as their political convictions. They are, at the same time, representatives of a nation, but they are also citizens of the world and they are determined to make their voice heard. Their voice and their words are the expression of their identity.*

Keywords: *language, national identity, frozen sequences, mass-media, political environment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity represents an invaluable asset for individuals, and, at the same time, for the collectivities they belong to. Many battles have been fought to protect this asset. Military battles but also linguistic confrontations implying words, phrases and discourse have been fought. Identity is sometimes reflected in the exterior aspect of individuals, in some character traits which they either show or hide, according to the situational context. More often than not it is language that reflects or betrays the individual's identity or that of a community. A regional word, a certain pronunciation of a word can direct us to the user's origin, whereas the use of certain idiomatic expressions, frozen sequences or proverbs can say a lot about the user's level of knowledge of a language. Languages have different ways to segment the extra-linguistic world and establish correspondence. The French linguist Jean Dubois (2007) thinks that "la structuration en langue ne recoupe pas la structuration conceptuelle" (language structure does not overlap concepts' structure), an opinion that reinforces the role of language in enhancing someone's identity. Discourse, in its various manifestations (political

discourse, media discourse and parliamentary discourse) is also important in unfolding national, social, ethnic or professional identity. We intend to prove what we have just stated through an analysis of the use of idiomatic expressions, frozen sequences (including proverbs) in media discourse. Our analysis concerns two languages of international circulation, French and English, which are, so to speak, vehicles for the values of Francophone and Anglophone communities.

2. IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

2.1 National identity. Individuals can claim affiliation to a nationality or a certain nationality is attributed to them according to their mother tongue and to the language register they use: literary language, spoken language, colloquial English or slang. Native speakers frequently use idiomatic expressions or frozen sequences, as other linguists prefer to call them (Anscombe, Mejri, 2011). Whatever name is given to those linguistic sequences, they express the respective individuals' way of seeing and naming reality. Foreign language speakers also use them proving a good level of knowledge of the respective language. By using these idiomatic expressions and frozen

sequences, they identify themselves with the way of thinking and expressing reality of the native speakers. The origin of the frozen sequences is more or less known, they are more or less motivated and more or less transparent in meaning. Thus, no one can guarantee that all Turks are strong, as it appears in the French frozen sequence “fort comme un Turc” (strong as a Turk), neither can we believe that all Polish people are heavy drinkers as we learn from the French frozen sequence “saoul comme un Polonais” (drunk as a Pole, but English people usually say that someone is “an Irish drunk”). We cannot honestly say that English people are ill-bred and yet, French people use the phrase “Après vous, Messieurs les Anglais!” (Help yourselves, Englishmen!). There is another phrase in French according to which German people argue about small and unimportant things : “faire des querelles d’Allemand” (to have a German quarrel). They say about a person who does not speak well French that “il parle le Français comme un Basque espagnol” (he speaks French like a Spanish Basque). On the other hand, English people have their sayings and frozen sequences about other nationalities. Feeling somewhat bitter for being under French kings for many centuries and unable to speak their language correctly they invented the phrase “Pardon my French!” Sometime later, this phrase began to mean also “Pardon my rude language”. Other nations were also perceived with a critical eye, for instance the Turks were considered as being uncontrollable, undisciplined, indomitable, so they say about a person who is unmanageable in a company that “he is a young Turk”. On the other hand, they considered Dutch people straightforward and unequivocal in affairs, but also avaricious, so they have the phrase “to pay Dutch” or “Dutch treat” which indicates that each person participating in eating together in a restaurant will pay for himself. As for the Irish people, if someone is very lucky, he has “the luck of the Irish”. They considered the French ill-bred and unable to take a proper leave, so they say about someone who simply disappears without saying Good bye that he took a “French leave”.

2.2. Ethnic identity. If by ethnicity we mean a group of people’s claim to common ancestry, to common values and cultural heritage, we will be able to understand why groups of persons of the same nationality despise or admire some other group of individuals of a different ethnicity. Perhaps some inhabitants of the French historic province of Brittany falsely claimed to have family

relationship with other people, so in French they say “être cousin à la mode de Bretagne” (to be cousins as people in Brittany are). The inhabitants of another historic province, Gascogne, are reputed to be liars, so they say in French about somebody who does not keep his promise that “il fait une promesse de Gascon” (he makes a Gascon’s promise). As for the inhabitants of Normandy, the general impression was that they are not straightforward in their answers, so their answer is “une réponse de Normand” (a Normand’s answer).

The British have also their way of speaking about human qualities or flaws they see in some inhabitants of their country. As they are reserved and not very talkative when they have not been properly introduced to someone, they use to say that “An Englishman’s home is his castle”. If in a company there are too many white collars and less black collars, they say that there are “too many chiefs and not enough Indians”. They also say about someone who has given something and tries to have it back that he is “an Indian giver”.

2.3. Professional identity. Exercising a trade makes some people develop certain characteristic features, either good or bad, or some habits or quirks which are not usually seen with other categories of people. This is often reflected in language, almost in all natural languages. French people think that chemists are very exact in measuring and quantifying substances for various medicines, so they say about someone who quantifies everything (especially money) with great precision that “il fait des comptes d’apothicaire” (he is making penny-pinching calculations). Chemists are also reputed for their good memory, so someone who remembers everything with great precision has “une mémoire d’apothicaire” (a chemist’s memory). Before the dentists, people had their teeth pulled out by somebody skilled enough to do this and skilled enough to tell lies, so they say in French that someone “ment comme un arracheur de dents” (lies very convincingly and very often). Monks were reputed for their ascetic living, which was not true for all monks, so French people say “l’habit ne fait pas le moine” (the habit does not make the monk). It also seems that monks had strict hours for everything, prayers or meals, and they never failed to follow their daily routine even if the abbot were late. Hence the expression “attendre quelqu’un comme les moines l’abbé” (to start doing something without waiting for the others). Shoe-makers are very good craftsmen but they are not cultivated, so in French they say “il ne faut pas

parler latin devant les Cordeliers” (yo do not speak Latin in front of a shoe-maker) when what you say is completely unintelligible and puzzling to someone. French people had great admiration for writers especially the talented ones and they say about such a person that “il a une plume d’ange” (he writes like an angel). As angels seemed to have all the qualities in the world, being perfect and pure, their qualities were also perfect and pure. Someone may have “une patience d’ange” (be very patient); he may work as an angel (“travailler comme un ange”); someone may sleep quietly, undisturbed by any thoughts (il dort comme un ange).

English people have their own opinion on some occupations and on the required qualities to be good at them. Someone who performs great and loyal service does “a yeoman’s service”. Some other trades are not so praised as they develop bad habits, as it is the case for sailors or soldiers, who often use coarse language. It is said that someone swears like a sailor/trooper. For the French people, the prototype of curses and rude language user is the coachman, so they say “jurer comme un charretier”. The persons who were hatters by trade turned mad because of the use of mercury, so they say in English that someone is “as mad as a hatter”. Someone who is in the habit of talking too much and giving unwanted advice is “a backseat driver”. Someone who is clumsy and causes damage, loss or injury is “like a bull in a China shop”.

3. IDENTITY, MEDIA AND POLITICS

3.1 Identity and media. As a consequence of historic and politic evolution, the world is divided in some cultural areas, usually based on sharing a common language and common values. Two such areas are the Francophone and the Anglophone ones, although as far as the Anglophone zone is concerned, we usually speak of Commonwealth or of the Commonwealth of Nations. The countries belonging to the Commonwealth are, obviously, territories belonging to the former British Empire. As for the Francophone area, it is considered to be rather a concept than a space (Baneth-Nouailhetas, 2010, 73-94) and this concept covers several realities: all the French speaking people, scattered on several continents, all the State-nations sharing linguistic and civilization ties.

At a closer look, we could find another difference between Francophonie and Commonwealth: the head of the Commonwealth of

Nations is her majesty, the queen of England, whereas the Francophone community (or area) elect periodically a Secretary-general of La Francophonie. However, a great many countries members of La Francophonie are former territories that used to be part of the French colonial empire. However, it would be a mistake to consider that the two organizations are a continuation of the colonial past of either France or Great Britain. Both countries found various ways to maintain the linguistic and cultural unity between the respective communities and to spread the commonly shared values. They organize conferences, cultural or sports events, summits and they try to enhance their common values.

Taking into account these two communities and other communities based on other values or criteria, we can consider that each and every citizen is a world citizen, since any event happening in a part of the world has some influence on every member of the world population.

We must state that the most usual language used in international organizations and in various fields of human activity is English. We must also state that the variety of English spoken around the world is not the most correct one, which lead to the creation of the blended term “globish” for that variety of English spoken by non-native people who are not so respectful of the English language rules. French, whether spoken by natives or non-natives, is also invaded by a lot of foreign words, most of them of Anglo-American origin. The French linguist R. Etiemble (1991) started to circulate the term of “franglais”, which, as well as “globish” is not flattering at all.

Nevertheless, French and English, as languages, as well as the values attached to the two communities, la Francophonie and the Commonwealth, are largely circulated around the world trough two television channels, TV5 Monde and BBC International. These two channels try to keep and circulate the most correct form of French or English, respectively and they also try to integrate the two communities or areas into the political and economic life. Globalization affects any of us, so we must keep up with all the events.

This activity is best represented by two programmes having a similar content, Kiosque (on TV5 Monde) and Dateline London (on BBC International). The two programmes focus on international politics, on events having taken place recently in the world but also in France or Great Britain. The events are debated by foreign

journalists based either in Paris or London, having as a moderator a French, respectively an English journalist specialized in international politics. The journalists invited as guests are not necessarily from the Francophone or Commonwealth area. As for the topics discussed, we could notice a special interest in the events taking place in the specified areas.

3.2 Identity, politics and media. Usually, there are four journalists invited as guests. They have a good level of knowledge of the respective foreign language, French or English, they are well informed about international politics, as this is their trade, and they behave in a very professional way, as this is part of their training. The talks are quite animated, since each journalist is invited to express his/her point of view in connection with some recent political major events. According to the part of the world they come from, they express more or less freely their personal opinions or judgments. Sometimes, for various reasons, they express the official opinion of the politicians in their own country. We must also notice that, more often than not, they cannot prevent themselves from taking sides, from being critical or sympathetic towards a political personality or towards his/her actions. Most of the time, their attitude and their words are a reflection of their national identity. Let us consider the programme of *Kiosque* from the 15th of February, 2015 (see <http://www.tv5monde.com/cms/chaine-francophone/>). The invited journalists came from countries which were directly concerned by, if not involved, in recent political events. The date of the programme is quite important, because it came after the signing of the second Minsk Agreement. The French moderator was somewhat worried, expressing in her words the general opinion of the Western states. The Russian journalist invited for the occasion, Vadim Glusker, proved himself to be a successful diplomat by the use of an argumentative strategy. He uses rhetoric interrogation as well as argumentative scale (Anscombe, Ducrot, 1997:51-78, 115-136) to convince his fellow journalists and the general public that the country he represents has nothing to do with that conflict and that Russia has no interest at all in Crimea. He is a good Russian on one hand, and a good journalist, on the other hand, because he represents a private Russian channel and he wants to appear at his best, promoting an image of a pacific Vladimir Putin and an image of himself as a passionate and professional journalist. He was neither confrontational nor defensive. In protecting his

own professional identity and his nationality, he showed a lot of diplomacy. He was less kind, understanding or protective towards his fellow citizens, the Russians, when the topic was HSBC and the hidden funds of many Russian citizens. In this case, no one was giving names, so it was quite safe for him to express criticism and to be ironic. The other journalists invited to the programme are of French, respectively of Belgian origin, so they represent the Francophone zone. Since in the case of this specific matter, of the Ukraine conflict, Francophones and Anglophones shared the same opinion, we may say that the French journalist and the Belgian one acted and spoke as citizens of the Western world, concerned about the conflict. The French journalist, Bernard Guetta, was not at all condescending, using words such “Putin a empoché ou, enfin, réempoche la Crimée” (Putin grabbed or grabbed again Crimea). The Belgian journalist chose another strategy to express his personal opinion and that of the other side, so to speak, by using a very professional and civilized language and presenting facts he himself witnessed, as he had covered some of the events for his Belgian newspaper. The two Western journalists proved to be very professional and they both behaved, each of them in his personal manner, like citizens of the world, concerned about political events happening around them. From the point of view of the exercise of their profession, people could see professional journalists at work. From the point of view of the cultural areas the difference between the two sides was more than obvious: East opposed to the West, as in a good old fashion cold war.

In *Dateline London*, on the 4th of April 2015, the topic was of general interest and with important consequences for all the countries in the world. The date is also important because it marked the nuclear agreement between some of the Western countries and the United States with Iran. It seemed but natural to invite an Iranian guest. The other topics covered the situation in Yemen and, as usual, a problem concerning home affairs in Great Britain, the General Elections for the future Prime-Minister. The other guests were a French-Algerian journalist, Nabila Ramdani and an American journalist, Jeffrey Kozman. All the guests were introduced as being “a writer and publisher” or “a writer and broadcaster”, so that we understand that they have a great experience in their profession and they are entitled to a point of view, either personal or professional, or the one of a national community. The first to state his national identity

was the Persian writer, Amir Taheri. When the moderator introduced the first topic, the Persian writer immediately took the floor. His language was not at all the most representative sample of literary language: "Agreement? What agreement? There is no agreement at all. There are several texts which are different from one another. No one says who did what". Except for the intonation, there is nothing wrong with this statement. The intonation expresses some irritation of an individual of Persian nationality who can, in his own name, express an opinion which could not have been expressed by a politician, especially those taking part in the talks in Geneva. The Persian writer's irritation is perhaps the same as the one of any Iranian politicians' as a consequence of being required to do something they are reluctant to in their home affairs. The requests of the participants at the talks in Geneva could have been perceived as an interference in home affairs, which could explain the Persian writer's irritation. In order to show that his means of expression are wider, he also uses irony: "In Persian we have seven words for agreement, so who knows?" Later he continues using irony, combined with some colloquial words: "I can't even call it a deal. It's a hotch-potch!". We could call it national identity at its highest peak. The other guests try to be moderate in their statements and to express in a politically correct language the opinion of the Western countries and of the United States. The American Jeffrey Kozman speaks about "old fashion diplomacy", while the French-Algerian Nabila Ramdani tries to put things into international perspective and even quotes the American president Obama who considered the talks "a historic moment". She appears as an objective journalist and a political analyst, capable of being impartial, as any professional journalist should be. The Persian writer and publisher Amir Taheri goes on being ironic and even rude in his words: "Somebody is lying to somebody. There is no doubt about it." Through their discourse, the other journalists represent the other side, the Western countries and the United States, behaving in a professional and diplomatic way, but keeping to a much more condescending attitude. When the moderator changes the topic and speaks about the General Elections in Great Britain, the Iranian writer does not seem to be very interested, even if he belongs to one of the territories that once were under British influence. Or perhaps just because of that. He becomes again interested when the talk is about the situation in Yemen. Again he proves the

same directness, saying what a Christian or a Western politician would not have said. Speaking about the crimes perpetrated by the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, he summarizes the situation in very rough terms: "Nobody is safe anywhere unless he or she lives under Islamic rules. The good Muslims are us (The Islamic State) the others are bad Muslims." By saying this, he also reveals his religious identity. The western journalists used a discourse closer to the politically correct one. First of all because they represented the Western community and then because they were aware of the fact that their words were perceived as "the response of the western countries" and they did not intend to be provocative.

As we can easily see, the talks in the programmes we are interested in turn around recent political events and it is natural to see and to hear the opinions of journalists representing the concerned countries. Nevertheless, there are some events of general interest, such as the International Women's Day. It was on the 8th of March 2015 that Kiosque (TV5 Monde) had only women as guests, marking the importance of this day which is highly appreciated by some and harshly criticized by others. Given the occasion, the journalists had the opportunity to express their opinion on the respective day and on women's value recognition. The African journalist Fatou Biramah, working for Afrique no 1, had the courage to say what the other journalists invited would not have said: "J'ai honte de ce jour-là" (I am ashamed of that day.) She expressed her irritation because she thinks that this day is not meant to celebrate women but to humiliate them. This was her opinion and this is how she meant to express her identity as a woman. The other journalists, one from Denmark, the other from Chili and another from France, were rather inclined to be satisfied for being celebrated, but they were not very enthusiastic either. They tried to be more reserved in expressing their point of view and they turn to a strategy: they spoke about women's role in society and about the rate of women's appreciation in statistics. The next topic of the programme was the murderous attack that took place in Bamako, Mali, that cost the life of several western citizens. The French journalist spoke with national pride about the exploits of the French army on Mali's soil and she underlined the importance of the French military intervention in reinstating order in Mali. Taking into account that Mali is an African state, that for many decades it

was part of the French colonial empire, we can easily understand the reaction of the African journalist. Her abrupt reaction did not surprise the other invited women journalists since she had already been introduced as a voice of radio Africa, well-known for her massive arguments. She was not a Mali national, still she was a national of one of the former colonies and her harsh words were the expression of some feelings that cannot be repressed. She used colloquial language (although she could have chosen another language register), so we suppose that she intended her words to be offensive. She did not take the trouble to think to some kind of explaining, she just said: “Je pense que la France doit arrêter de penser qu’elle est le reine, qu’on est le roi du monde et qu’on peut faire n’importe quoi n’importe où sur le globe!” (I think that France should stop thinking that it is the queen, that it is the king of the world and it can do whatever it wants wherever on the globe!) These are very strong words and they are usually heard from nationals belonging to former colonies of one of the colonial empires. They are meant to define the personality and, at the same time, the identity of a woman with a strong character who is not afraid to speak her own mind, even if what she says is not politically correct.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Identity is a complex concept and it is, generally speaking, revealed by individuals through language, behaviour or even clothes. Identity is strongly influenced by social, historic and economic reality. It would be interesting to establish with every individual if he or she has only one identity or whether his/her identity is made up of several sub – categories of identity. In our opinion, someone’s identity is constantly

influenced by external factors, but it cannot change very much. If we consider identity as a whole entity, we think that some proportions might vary, some other proportions might diminish and other may increase.

Identity is best expressed through language and that is why, most of the times, individuals’ identity is analyzed according to the language he uses.

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