

Ethnic identity construction without an ethnic language

A case of two migrant communities in Germany

A number of recent studies have investigated the ways speakers utilize their linguistic resources to create and negotiate identities in interaction, including ethnic identities (such as Bailey 2000, Lo 1999). The majority of these studies have focused on migrant situations where language(s) other than the language of the surrounding majority is used by the speakers to mark their ethnic affiliations. This way, a certain dichotomy is often being assumed which equates one language with one particular ethnicity, allowing speakers to draw from features of their “ethnic” language to signal their affiliations with a particular minority.

The current paper presents results of a study of language and ethnic identity in a migrant situation that does not fall into this common pattern. It looks at the relationship between two recent migrant communities in Germany (Russian German and Russian Jewish), that bring to Germany two distinct ethnic identities while sharing the same set of languages. Having lost their “ethnic” languages (German and Yiddish), both of these migrant groups come to Germany mainly as native speakers of Russian and acquire German after migration as their second language. At the same time, they both are faced with a need to negotiate their own space within the landscape of the German society, including positioning themselves towards each other, as they are often perceived and mislabeled as one group in the eyes of the receiving society. In such situation, where L1 and L2 are shared by the communities, the question that arises is whether and how speakers use this language combination in the process of their group’s identity construction.

This research relies on sociolinguistic interviews with members of both communities supported by the evaluation of social networks of community members. The analysis of the linguistic behaviors in the two communities shows that same language combination seems to be used for expressing two distinct ethnic identities within the larger Russian-speaking migrant population. With an absence of a distinct “ethnic” language, the weight of the identity marking is shifting towards the specific practices and ideologies around the use of the common L1 and L2, with distinct patterns of linguistic behaviors characteristic for each of the communities. In particular, attitudes towards and practices of L1 maintenance within the community, attitudes towards and practices of code-switching and, most interestingly, issues of acquisition of L2 emerged as the most powerful tools in constructing a group ethnic identity.

Overall, the results of the study show that in situations where no distinct linguistic code is associated with a particular group, the models proposed by Bailey and others are not able to capture the ways speakers utilize linguistic resources available to them in creating identities (including ethnic identity). The analysis presented in this paper, which emphasizes linguistic practices rather than linguistic codes, is better able to take the understanding of the relationship between language and ethnic identity beyond the commonly assumed dichotomy of “one language” – “one ethnicity”.

References:

- Bailey, B. 2000. Language and Negotiation of Ethnic/Racial Identity among Dominican Americans. *Language in Society* 29: 555-582.
- Lo, A. 1999. Codeswitching, Speech Community Membership and the Construction of Ethnic Identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 461-479.