



Self-Reflection: A complex Connection among Language, Culture, Identity, and Difference

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Abstract

The identity-taking process involves a complicated push-and-pull relation from different related aspects like language, culture, and differences. To understand this concept deeper, a self-study can be one of the ways to explore how one's life experience of encountering diverse cultures, language barriers, and differences encourages him/her to define who he/she is and what relation he/she has his/her surroundings. This study is a self-reflection based on the author's personal life experience to ignite the challenges of constructing identity due to cultural barriers, language ownership, and social relations with other people involved.

Keywords: self-reflection, identity, culture, and language

Introduction

To begin with, this discussion explores the concept of representation which later will link language, culture, identity, and differences. According to Hall (2013), representation is a process of making meaning of things using language to others. Everything in this world will be meaningless unless it is represented. For instance, “cup” has no meaning until we represent it as a kind of small container for drinking which typically has a handle. Hall (2013) further explains two systems of representations. First, the system is related to our mental concepts which we use to interpret the material world meaningfully (Hall, 2013). According to Saussure (1960 as cited in Hall, 2013, p.16), this notion refers to *signifier*—“concepts or ideas in our head”. The second process, namely *signified* is a set of abilities to recognize similarities and differences to construct relationships from one object to another (Evans, 2015). This system allows us to find or establish the correlation of ideas in our minds with other things which may be associated with it. As an illustration, the word ‘plane’ (signifier) can be associated with ‘a mode of transportation which can bring passengers through the air from one place to another (signified).

As mentioned earlier, language is needed as the medium of representation. People utilize a language to translate their concepts in mind into signs (*iconic/visual* and *indexical/* spoken or



written signs), which are shared and understood by them. Language is a tool we use to “make sense of things in which meaning is produced and exchanged” (Hall, 2003, p.1). In addition, Allan et al. (2010) state that people use language to think and talk with themselves. In the cases of Hall (2003) and Allan et al. (2010), it can be concluded that language facilitates us to express what is in our minds into a meaning that can be shared not only with others but also with ourselves. In other words, language is a system of representations (Hall, 2003; Joseph, 2004), which means that language can construct and sustain meaning. Ideas, thoughts, and feelings are translated or transferred through many forms of language like signs or symbols—written words, sounds, gestures, expressions, visual images, or objects (Hall, 2003; Allan et al., 2010). These various forms of language enable us to communicate in varied contexts like formal letters, traffic signs, emergency alarms, and so on.

However, interpreting meanings in a language requires access to its representational systems. Thus, only those who come from the same culture can use roughly similar access to interpret the meaning which is being shared (Hall, 2013; Dijk, 1997). For example, you may not understand the Indonesian word ‘bantal’, because you do not have access to the Indonesian system of representation. To have the access, you must be able to crack or understand the *codes* of *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian Language). The word ‘bantal’ means ‘pillow’ in English. Now, you have the access to interpret ‘bantal’ after the meaning of ‘bantal’ is translated into the language you are familiar with, which is English. In this system of representation, the signs for ‘BANTAL’ or ‘PILLOW’ apply the principle of *arbitrary*. According to Hall (2013, p.7), arbitrary means “that in principle any collection of letters or any sound in any order would do the trick equally well”. When the order of letters in B-A-N-T-A-L is changed into a new order—for example, L-A-T-N-A-B, it may result in a different meaning or even no meaning. This is because the new order of letters neither refers to anything in Indonesian conceptual systems nor to Indonesian language systems. In conclusion, language is the way we communicate our conceptual map about the world into meaning, and we need to understand codes of language to access the meaning shared in particular orders of signs.

This essay will elaborate on the complex connections among language, culture, identity, and differences. The illustrations of each concept will be provided for the sake of a comprehensive understanding of how those concepts are significant in human social lives. Furthermore, my self-study will be explored and discussed according to those concepts.



Theoretical Framework

Culture as Shared Meaning

Before discussing the concept of culture, it is needed to clarify the differences between culture and nature. According to Kramersch (2004), nature refers to everything that is born organically in this world, such as trees, flowers, rocks, mountains, air, water, and so on, while culture refers to what is created by human beings (Kramersch, 2004). Take ‘wooden chair’ as an illustration. The wood used to make a chair is a part of nature, while the shape of wood after being crafted into a chair is a part of culture. In essence, nature can be a part of culture after it is processed by humans. Now, we can move to the concept of culture in relation to human lives.

Culture has an important role to regulate human lives because it is the core of the concept in which people in the same cultural groups make and share meanings with one another. Consequently, culture plays two effects on its members—liberating and constraining based on the social convention of its members (Kramersch, 2004). Culture allows people to construct a new culture like food products, norms, rules, beliefs, songs, signs, or even language, but at the same time, through certain regulations, it restricts its members from making new meanings out of social conventions. The reason culture constrains its members is that it should mark them based on the shared meanings among the members of the culture (Hall, 2003; Joseph, 2004). Therefore, “cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head’, but they also organize and regulate social practices and influence our conduct” (Hall, 2003, p.3). Meaning in a culture is dynamic. It may change from time to time following the way the members of culture view the world. For example, in the past, people knew that word ‘apple’ is just a fruit but in the present, besides a fruit, the word ‘apple’ can be interpreted as a brand of electronic devices.

This is because culture is influenced by two layers of culture—synchronic (social) and diachronic (historical) (Kramersch, 2004). The social layer refers to the current culture or currently shared meanings, while the historical layer refers to the culture in the past. Thus, the conceptual maps of people in the past may be different from those of people in the present. Furthermore, Kramersch (2004) adds the third layer, namely imagination which consists of dreams and imaginings that direct people to decide and act beyond what we can ever think. It is therefore noted that many inventions as cultural products are derived from human dreams or imaginings like airplanes, rockets, smartphones, robots, vehicles, and so on. These three layers (synchronic, diachronic, and imaginary) can construct and reconstruct the shared meanings within a particular culture. Therefore, the members of culture rejected a cultural product like fashion, thoughts, or technology in the past, but then they may accept it now.



Identity and Difference

Identity and difference have a strong causal link in defining ourselves in the relation to the world. People can identify their identities by comparing their differences with others. A difference is what makes sense of how we are distinct from and similar to others, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, ideology, or religion (Woodward, 1997; Abeysekara, 2002). Woodward (1997) admits that identity is often marked by extreme polarizations of differences like black and white, insider and outsider, heterosexual and homosexual, superiority and inferiority, powerful and powerless, oppressors and oppressed, and so on. In the process of constructing the identity of an individual or the entire community, culture has a great role in marking its members. Culture has power and control to determine those who include and exclude (Kramsch, 2004; Hall, 2003). However, some groups may resist accepting what culture defines them. This triggers a tension of debates between essential and non-essential approaches on how identity should be represented or perceived.

Essentialists believe that “identity is fixed or unchanging” (Woodward, 1997, p.12; Hall, 2012). This claim is established by the shared past and biological truths (Woodward, 1997). The shared past refers to the same history of culture in which the members experience the world in similar ways. While, biological truths refer to identity as biological heredities such as motherhood, physical body, and sexuality (Gleeson & Wakefiel, 1968). This view aligns with the perspective which considers identity as ‘being’ (Bright, 2017). Another perspective on the concept of ‘being’ is that a meaning represents a certain kind of individual in the given contexts (moments, social interactions, time, and place) (Gee, 2000; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). This notion recognizes an identity of individuals based on how a given context influences their and others’ perceptions of who they are and conducts of what they can and cannot do. However, non-essentialists have an opposite position to essentialist claims. Non-essentialists claims that identity is fluid or changing (Woodward, 1997). This view emphasizes that identity can change all the time due to social changes like social movements, industrial developments, influential information from media, or political decisions. This perspective leads individuals to reconstruct their own identities by struggling and negotiating against the current social acceptance. In the essence, identity can be a process of becoming, and it can be multiple depending on how many identities one wants to struggle and to become (Bright, 2017; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). In short, the process of ‘becoming’ is an endless process while ‘being’ is the attained status after the becoming process.

To elaborate on how identity is constructed, it is important to explore its relationship to representation. Meanings are made through representations in which people make sense of who they are; what they are; and what they experience (Woodward, 1997). As a cultural process, representations help individuals to identify themselves through symbolic systems (differences)



within the culture such as the place where they were born; knowledge or experiences they share; the language they speak; ~~on~~ what position they are in; or what they can possibly become. As can be seen, representation and culture play the roles of establishing the identification systems of identities.

As noted earlier, ~~that~~ identities are marked by differences via symbolic systems which makes identities depend on differences (Woodward, 1997). To manage how identity is made through differences, there are two ways that need to be taken into account, namely classificatory systems and binary opposition. Classificatory systems apply the principle of distinguishing individuals into at least two polarizations based on certain characteristics (Woodward, 1997). For example, Indonesian people can recognize the difference between ~~of~~ tribes from their unique local languages as ~~the~~ characteristics. Meanwhile, binary opposition is “the most extreme form of marking differences” (Woodward, 1997, p.35). In the perspective of binary opposition, differences can be considered negative as they can create social divisions like nature/culture, masters/slaves, high class/low class, educated/uneducated, rich/poor, light/dark, developed/developing, advanced/backward and so on. To sum up, a symbolic representation marks differences by the production of meanings in any social relations, but these two ways of marking differences have not pointed out reasons why people accept or take the identities attached to them.

People determine their identity based on their subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to the process of how individuals construct their identities by involving consciousness and unconsciousness in thinking, emotions of grasping who they are, and feelings confronted with diverse positions in culture (Woodward, 1997). People may decide their identities beyond what we may imagine. For example, some can either consciously or unconsciously consider (feel) them as females, while their physical bodies are males. This can lead them to negotiate their current identities into new ones based on their feelings, thoughts, or emotions. In conclusion, subjectivity has a great deal with how people learn and take up their identities.

Writer’s Personal Experiences

Me and Javanese

Mingling with friends sometimes requires me to immerse myself in their cultures and languages. When I studied in Yogyakarta, I used to hang out with my Javanese friends from ~~the~~ class IV of English Education. One day, I intended to get close to them by trying to speak with them in their language which was Javanese. On a casual occasion in our campus, Toni said “let’s have lunch”. Then, I responded “Kulo sampun dahar” (a polite manner in the Javanese language)



or “I have eaten”. Actually, this type of Javanese expression is used to show respect to elder people. However, he said that the way I spoke Javanese was not proper for the casual interactions. Since that time, I have not spoken Javanese because I am afraid that it would make me look or sound weird.

As explained above, language is the medium people share meanings. From the story, we can notice that ‘lunch’ has no meaning until Toni represents it in a certain time and context. It indicates that Toni invites us as his friends to have lunch because it is at noon in which most of us may be hungry. Besides, language is used to express feelings or intentions through word choice (Holmes, 2008). Toni seems to eat lunch with us and does not want to be alone. It can be interpreted that having lunch together is the culture of our group that we shape into our habits. Therefore, Toni could say “let’s have lunch”. Moreover, Toni’s invitation shows his identity as a part of our group. He would not have asked to have lunch together with us unless he had known us as his friends who shared common meanings with him.

Another point that can be explored is how we construct our identities in our friendship. We belong to the same class of English Education in which our identities as English Education students are marked by similarity. However, at the same time, our identities as students of English Education make us different from other students from other majors. This is because we apply the principle of the classificatory system in which we defined ourselves as ‘us’ and others as ‘them’ according to the certain characteristics (our major and class group). This notion helps us to determine those who include in and exclude from our group.

The last point of the story I want to examine is how the Javanese language makes me feel excluded from my Javanese friends. Members of a culture make meanings through their shared language in certain times and contexts (Holmes, 2008; Risager, 2006). What makes the process of representation can be interpreted meaningfully is the proper use of language in the appropriate context. Based on my story, the way I speak the Javanese language does not seem proper to my friends and the given context even though it is intended to show respect to my friends. Yet, they may interpret it as a joke or perhaps a humiliation because indirectly they are called as elders. As mentioned in the story, the expression “Kulo sampun dahar” is supposed to be used for a conversation with elder people. The miscommunication and the misinterpretation happen due to our different representational systems. I then learn that knowing the codes of language is not enough to be a member of Javanese culture or a Javanese user. This makes me realize that as a cultural process, language is a complex entity which requires not only codes to access it but also the knowledge (experience) of how the system of representation can work in certain contexts (Dijk, 1991).



Through this experience, I define my identities in ~~into~~ at least three forms. First, I am a student of English Education as my educational background. Second, I am a member of class IV as my cultural community where I produce and exchange meanings or experiences with other members like having lunch together. The last, I am not a Javanese user due to my inability to speak Javanese even if I struggle with it. But then, I give up on the process of becoming a Javanese user. In my case, I can conclude that my two first identities belong to the concept of ‘being’ because I attained them while my last identity refers to a ‘becoming’ process which is an ongoing process. This experience proves that someone can have multiple identities and continue “becoming” (Bright, 2017; Sfarid & Prusak, 2005).

Manners of Students in Islamic School

Most Islamic schools in Indonesia share common standards of manners for students to apply. When I was a student at the Secondary Islamic school in Ketapang Indonesia, my fellow students and I applied these standards of manners. We started and ended our learning activities by praying together for blessings, mercy, and protection from God. To respect teachers, we bowed when we met them or when we walked in front of them. When teachers came to the class, all students should stand up to respect the teachers. These are some standards of manners that students should refer to while they are in school.

I have learned that shared meanings are constructed by the community within a culture (Hall, 2003; Kramsch, 2004). From this second story, the culture is constituted in an Islamic educational institution where all members (teachers, staff, and students) share the meanings controlling their conduct. This can be seen through students’ attitudes which are constrained by the standards of manners. Take the tradition of praying as the first illustration. Praying in an Islamic manner shows how we can be different from those of the other non-Islamic schools in Ketapang or even Indonesia. Some public schools may not have this tradition because students bring various backgrounds of religions along with them. In this sense, praying in the Islamic way indicates that we (all students) are Muslims as our religious identities as we have common ways of praying. Besides, this habit shows that we (all school members in that school) share the same conceptual map about God whom we beg for ~~the~~ blessings, mercy, and protection. At this point, it reveals that there is one extreme polarization between believers and their God—inferior-and-superior relationship. This relationship is represented and sustained through the language we use to pray. This proves that language can establish a concept of something abstract or spiritual like God in this case by linking the concept of God (signifier) with other things associated with Him like blessings, mercy, and protection (signified) (Evans, 2015). In conclusion, the tradition of



praying becomes the meaning which marks us as members of the school different from others, and regulates us to view our relations with our God in our mental concept.

The next are the habits of ‘bowing’ and ‘standing up’ in which they are supposed to show respect to the teachers. A bow can be interpreted as respect as in some cultures, people use a bow to honor one another just like Japanese people bow to each other without considering their age or social status. However, in Java, a bow is used to honor elder people or royal family members. In the Islamic school, a bow is considered as a respect for teachers. In fact, we as students, often do not bow when we meet our teachers outside of school. This means that the bow is only constructed and shared within the school as a cultural institution. This rule emphasizes how the positions of students and teachers are established differently. The identities of students and teachers are constructed through knowledge and power in which the discourse between them influences their conduct according to their identities in that school as Foucault (1977 as cited in Hall, 2003, p.49) states that knowledge has the power to regulate social conduct. Therefore, this bow is the sign or code in which we recognize who we are in relation to our teachers in the school context. In that school, a teacher is perceived as the source of knowledge who has power over the students. This fact leads all school members to apply the principle of the binary opposition in which we identified our relationship as a vertical relationship—knowledgeable/unknowledgeable or high/low positions.

The last form of respect in the story is ‘standing up’ when the teachers come into the classroom. This form of respect resembles a military salute from soldiers to their captains. In the culture of the school, teachers may be perceived as captains who lead classroom activities. This perception relies on roughly similar conceptual maps of all members of the school. Then, it is translated into a sign in the form of the gesture (stand up) which generates the meanings representing two different identities (students and teachers) in the classroom. In conclusion, two forms (bow and stand up) of respecting teachers represent the meanings of how teachers and students construct their relationship in the school and classroom context—a vertical relation. This relationship controls how we could behave and interact with each other under our social convention in the school context.

Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of identity is an emotional and conscious decision that is influenced by surrounding environments, life experiences, status, or social backgrounds. People can define who they are or where they belong by reflecting on how they think about themselves and how they deal with their social environment. This process involves a complex connection



among language, culture, and people as they influence each other to classify who is an insider or outsider in the social setting where an individual is.

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