Language and Identity during second language learning and teaching

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Abstract

Second language teaching and learning is a difficult process which requires a 1) psychological as well as a 2) neurological and 3) physical involvement. It is a delicate situation even when a second language is simply a subject included into the school curriculum. Learning a second language is not like the learning of any other subject, as for instance, history or literature or physics and so on. They require great effort, duty and talent, too, but they involve neither different cultural background and consequently different behaviour nor a specific position of the muscles of the vocal tract when speaking. When students afford different subjects in their mother tongue, the brain receives various stimuli, but the areas deputed to language remain the same. Identity is not touched, because the surrounding cultural context is familiar and well known. Learning a second and a third language involves different areas of the two hemispheres, stimulating the right side of the brain, too, a side which is considered more engaged in artistic matters than in linguistic inputs. The learning of foreign languages cannot avoid implying cultural details, cannot reduce a foreign language to the simple substitution of nouns to the same object. Language is much more; it is the way people construct their own identity; it is the way people face reality; it is the way they enjoy, suffer, save food and clothes, help friends, pray, work, bring up children, educate them and so on. In a word, it is the focus of our own identity. I do not mean that any time we learn a new language we have to change identity, I mean that we have to be conscious that, while enriching our linguistic ‘bag,’ the culture belonging to the new language fills our mind enriching our identity, because we are able to distinguish between what is a false stereotype and what derives from real traditions and ways of life. Identity is the focus of our life; it is the most important aspect of our inner self; it dominates our feelings and our reactions. Language reveals our identity; it is attached to our environment and our context, so that it is the link between our past and our future life. Language and identity depend one on the other, even though language gives identity the main input to develop gradually according to the surrounding context. That is why schizophrenic population, twins, migrants try to express themselves throughout a language they manipulate in a very personal manner. In brief, I want to say that learning a second or a third language is not a matter of words and rules to apply, rather it is the ability to understand the deep cultural sense contained in any expression from either linguistic, paralinguistic or kinetic side.

Key words: Identity, second language learning, Bilingualism, Migration, Twins, Schizophrenic population

Introduction

Language and identity depend one on the other, even though language gives identity the main input to develop gradually according to the surrounding context. Thus, here I am going to examine how identity grows up and how, mostly for some linguistic reasons, seems to fade out leaving people unbalanced and confused.

There are many problems causing the loss of identity, but here I am going to examine four situations, which, while at first, appear sharply separated, rather they are linked one another. They are linked because the first symptoms are revealed by linguistic as well as paralinguistic and kinetic means of communication. I am referring to: 1) bilingualism, 2) immigration, 3) twin relationship, and 4) schizophrenic population, viewed from the linguistic point of view. The latter, might be the
extreme consequence of one of the above situations when lived with frustration within a setting considered, by the subject involved, unfamiliar and hostile.

Thus, this presentation examines the language of these four cases, and how the observer tries to re-constructs identity through the analysis of verbal means linked to life experience.

1) Bilingualism and Identity

Bilingualism, at the moment, is considered an important input for children during their cognitive development, since it stimulates knowledge in general, through a well planned, but natural linguistic and cultural setting. At the beginning of the last century, bilingualism was considered under a negative perspective (Saer, 1923; Seidl, 1937), mostly because those first experiments were not scientifically organized. Later, when researchers improved their approaches, the positive effects of bilingualism were widely attested.

“The age of acquisition plays a part not only in respect of cognitive representation but also in other aspects of the bilingual’s development, particularly his linguistic, neuropsychological, cognitive and sociocultural development. Age of acquisition combines with other data from the subject’s language biography, such as context of acquisition and use of the two languages” (Hamers and Blanc, 1989: 10).

“Numerous studies have reported that bilingualism can have positive effects on cognitive development. This has been demonstrated on tasks of concept formation, creativity, visual-spatial abilities, and metalinguistic awareness, and it has been noted in a wide variety of language situations with learners of different ages and level of proficiency” (Cenoz and Genesee eds.: 24).

Some scepticism still remains, because this process requires great care and great experience. Language grows within a precise context involving a variety of objects, environment, food, climate, sport, as well as a variety of people with their behaviour and traditions. The bilingual child has to carry a heavy burden. S/he has to acquire linguistic as well as cultural data referring to two different atmospheres. The scientific debate is divided into two opinions: 1) some researchers think that a bilingual subject stores the knowledge related to the two languages ‘in two separate language-specific memory system’ (Scarborough, Cortese); 2) others affirm that they build up a single system containing the different linguistic and cultural experiences (De Groot, Nas). Bilingualism is a delicate process requiring a conscious and serene setting, in which everything is carefully planned even showing spontaneous features. It is delicate, because it is linked to the notion of ‘mother-tongue:’ the dominant language, the language of the place of birth, the language of the mother. Any small conflict within a bilingual setting destroys this process, unbalances the building of the character, and consequently of identity. Identity, in fact, relies on language mostly.

Language supports us to declare our feelings, our desires, our requests, our expectations towards our world and our people. When a child does not receive enough support during his/her bilingual development h/she starts showing identity problems, which touch not only the emotional but even the physiological sphere. The case of a boy, living within an Italian family hostile to the bilingual process wanted principally by his English mother, provoked great problems of identity as well as of physiological nature. The poor boy was so frustrated by his mother who, desperately wanted him to talk English, and by his father who, opposite to his wife, insisted on him to speak Italian, that at a certain point, he started losing his capacity either to walk or to speak. His language was a kind of ‘obscure’ language, neither Italian nor English, so cryptic that even within the familiar context his requests were not understood and remained unsatisfied. In conclusion, after a deep analysis of both his emotional reactions to this too much constructed bilingual situation full of familiar conflicts, and his linguistic system, the boy (aged 7) seemed to gain a certain communicative effect. We suggested his parents and all the people involved within the familiar setting to be more cooperative, especially by avoiding personal disappointment and by stimulating the child to choose personally, without any external imposition, the language he thought was more
suitable for him. The problem took a long time to be solved, and little by little, while gaining psychological security, which led to re-gain identity, also the language became less cryptic (D’Acierno, www.masah.it).

“Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of responsive and involved parents in the cognitive, language and socio-emotional development of children and adolescents. Thus, it is not surprising that educational research also invariably shows that children benefit significantly when their parents are supportive of and involved in their education” (Lindholm-Leary, 2002: 144).

The most important point to focus on during the development of a bilingual process is that parents should not feel frustrated and excluded when the child addresses each parent in a different language. In fact, they should take in mind that young children at first do not realize they are listening or speaking two languages. Rather, because of the imitation process, they unconsciously link each language to each people. Consequently, not to confuse toddlers, mothers and fathers should always use the same language when addressing their children. In brief, even in a close and protected familiar setting, the development of two languages might create conflicts, mostly because the role of language is double: 1) to protect, but meanwhile 2) to reveal the real identity of the speaker. Fortunately, the majority of bilingual children face this process from the correct perspective; that is, mother and father do not want to impose their own language only to prevail one on the another, but to offer their children wider perspectives. They adopt a spontaneous approach in order to provide as many stimuli as possible to enrich both the cognitive and linguistic growth of their children without losing identity.

“The linguistic development is associated to the child’s growing phases, above all to the moment in which the notion of autonomy is starts to assume a clear representation. Language helps the child to control the feelings related to ‘separation’; language exalts the first pleasures linked to social interaction and it prepares the road to the formation of a sense of auto-identity’ (Mahler et al. 1975: 115).”

2) Migration and Identity

The second point, the one concerning migration, is much different from bilingualism. In a migrant situation, various conflicts emerge from both personal and environmental sides. These conflicts are very difficult to overcome, and very easily they cause the loss of identity because of lack of linguistic and emotional means. I have to stress again that the learning of a language implies psychological as well as mental processes, which are necessary tools when building up one’s own identity (D’Acierno, 1996). For this reason, the loss of one language, as it often happens in immigrant situations, develops a grievous feeling associated with the lack of identity and the deprivation of reality:

“Language is more than just a mirror of reality but is an effective part of the reality of social changes” (Fox, 1968: 464).

“The acquisition of speech and language is a major axis in the psychological development and maturation in childhood. It takes place within the context of the mother-childhood” (Mirsky, 1991: 618).

In sum, when immigrants try to forget their linguistic and cultural roots in order to accelerate the process of integration into the host country, the feeling of loss includes the total negation of their past identity. Of course, the new identity does not find strong pillars, because there are no cultural as well as emotional supports, rather this new identity has the only role to fill up a deep hole. As we have already seen for the bilingual boy, whose mother imposed on him the learning of English, also for immigrants the foreign tongue, is viewed as an imposition and not as a free choice. Moreover, the learning of the foreign language is a clear negation of the past: the mother, the country, the loved ones, the time which now unfolds within another place. In a word, it means the
loss of a well constructed identity; it means the demolition of the past identity, which, opposite to
the new one, developed on solid and natural ground. Rather, identity is lived as a necessary tool to
acquire in order to be accepted in an unfamiliar setting.

“… one of the most important source of anguish as well as of uncomfortable ness derives from the
separation from a loved one, or rather from the fear of that separation. (…) we are scared not only for the
new reality, but above all for the absence of our old reality” (Bowly, 1975: 109).

The building up of our past reality implied the construction of images linked to our experience.
These images were then put in a side of our memory, which stored them in a context all surrounded
by cultural details. The development of language strengthened those images while we talked about
them transferring our experience to the other people of our context: “The characteristics of language
contain a certain weltanschauung that determines the way its speakers perceive and apprehend
reality. In creating our image of reality, language moulds that reality” (Grinberg, 1989: 99).

The fear of facing new experiences limits the acquisition of the host language, so, depriving the
speech act of coherence and cohesion. The resulting language is a hybrid mixture between the
mother tongue and the foreign language.

“The new words that were neither English nor Italian created tragicomic situations, and as they became
part of the immigrant folklore, reflected intimate anxieties that could not be spoken openly” (Mangione and
Morreale, 1993: 229).

In so doing, also the new images now linked to other linguistic means contribute to confuse the
hearer, since images belong to both our personal reaction and our cultural context. An ‘obscure,’
cryptic language with faded images, grammatically and semantically far from both the mother
tongue and the foreign language, emerges within a vague and imprecise context. The resulting
‘obscure’ language is not able to convey any precise meaning. It only succeeds in giving a pale idea
of what is in the speaker’s mind. In doing so, it betrays the real purpose of language. Language, in
fact, is the most peculiar tract identifying the speaker. The way we speak reveals our personal and
anthropological world; language speaks about us; language reveals our identity; language explains
our images, and meanwhile, it turns into tongue. The tongue that may even betray us by dropping us
back in a world we want to forget. In fact, in some cases the foreign language is preferred to the
mother tongue, because it opens to a new and full of perspectives world while hiding the old.

“I am afraid. I don’t want to talk German. I have the feeling that talking in German I will have to
remember something I wanted to forget” (Greenson, 1978: 31).

These words emphasize the intimacy contained in the language; an intimacy which reveals
unconsciously even what we want to hide, because the mother tongue is part of ourselves. It is like a
fan, which coming from our deep ‘Id,’ goes on amplifying as well as unveiling all the cultural
details belonging to our social group and to our feelings after crossing our ‘Ego.’ As pointed out by
both Erikson and Piro, all these details – linguistic and cultural – contribute to build up our identity
as well as to turn language into mother-tongue. But, they say, either our identity or our mother
tongue should be ‘iridescent.’ They mean that the former should never be strongly fixed, and the
latter should provide mental and syntactical tools to enable our brain, our mental system and our
behaviour to accept other realities, thus, to start our own anthropological transformation without
traumatic consequences.

“I have been using the term ego identity to denote certain comprehensive gains which the individual, at
the end of adolescence, must have derived from all of his pre-adult experience in order to be ready for the
task of adulthood. (…) the term identity points to an individual’s link with the unique values, fostered by a
unique history of his people. Yet, it also relates to the cornerstone of this individual’s unique development:
(…). The term identity expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within
oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with other’s (Erikson, 1956: 56-121).

“The identity that I here criticize, is the sick identity, the miserable identity, the one that it is swollen by the subject, the one which becomes too strict, the one which covers every single detail of the subject” (Piro, 1995: 31-32).

The problem is that we should learn to be flexible, to accept differences and similarities by realizing that the new experiences, lived in a new world through a new language, do not cancel our past, do not mean the corruption of our previous world, do not suffocate the dear people of our childhood, do not abandon our mother tongue. All these past memories should rather form a solid background to stimulate further knowledge. The problem is to acquire a certain balance between the old and the new without hiding oneself or negating the new environment, the new culture, the new people, the new experiences linked to the new language. The road we run along during our life does never follows our plans; it often breaks down, becoming crooked and difficult. When these anomalies happen in our usual context, we justify them by saying that ‘the destiny’ has a major role in our life; when they happen outside our usual context, a sense of fault assails ourselves leaving us full of grief and discomfort. Piro, in his researches, has really amplified the necessity for each of us to realize that during our life our aims need to be changed as much as possible in order to develop the full knowledge of our personal resources without limiting the development of our personality.

A deep and personal anthropological transformation will help us to achieve our goals. The main difference between bilingualism and foreign language learning for immigrants is that the former is spontaneous, while the latter seems an imposition derived from external situations. The similarities are based on personal acceptance removing panic for the unknown. But, being able to switch from one language into another, even if the two languages are not well balanced, offers the speaker the advantage to use the one s/he thinks is more appropriate not only to the external context, but, moreover, to her/his intimate reactions. In other words, as above pointed out, since the mother tongue has a more close, secret, involved relationship with the speaker, once we want to face a topic only superficially, without risking to unveil our privacy, we switch on either the second or the foreign language. Because, even spontaneous bilinguals construct in their mind a kind of ladder on which they put languages according to the distance felt within their intimate sphere.

In conclusion, both a bilingual and an immigrant situation might provoke stressful consequences. The former, because the child might feel put apart from the familiar context for lack of cognitive and linguistic knowledge, thus, raising a sense of emotional exclusion. The latter, because the emigrant, for lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge, might feel excluded from the host country, and sometimes from the family, too. In fact, young sons and daughters, usually learn the host languages much better and faster than their parents; above all faster than their mothers, who spend most of their time at home. Thus, immigrants, while finding refuge either in their own language, or on peoples and on remembrances, develop a kind of isolation attached to the old world. The pathologies deriving from these two situations affect both behaviour and verbal and non-verbal communication. The two cases described by Canetti and Modell show very clearly how linguistic exclusion might turn into world exclusion.

“When my father came along from the store, he would instantly speak to my mother. They were very much in love at that time and had their own language, which I didn’t understand: they spoke German, the language of their happy schooldays in Vienna (...). So, I had a good reason to feel excluded when my parents began their conversation (...). (...) the most intense was my desire to understand their secret language. I cannot explain why I didn’t really hold it against my father. Did nurture a deep resentment toward my mother; and it vanished only years later after his death, when she herself began teaching me German” (Canetti, 1979: 10).

“(…) his mother has left him at the age of two in the care of an elderly, nearly blind grandfather who spoke only Yiddish, which the patient did not understand” (Modell, 1991: 235).
3) Twins and Identity

The third situation concerns twin relationship, viewed through a linguistic analysis of written material and drawings, belonging to a couple of English twins (7 years of age), attending the British Forces School of the Nato Base in Naples (D’Acierno 1990).

The familiar and school context of the children is very comfortable and offers them a relaxed atmosphere without stressing too much their similarities and differences. However, as usually happens in a twin couple, there is always one who prevails on the other. In our case, Adam, who was born first, appears stronger and psychologically more secure. He has assumed a protecting role toward Anthony. He does not suffocate him, rather a kind of complicity has been established between them. The children examined are dizygotic twins, so they look desperately similar. They make fan of this expedient and play many tricks to people. They have developed a private language – a kind of foreign language unknown to others –, because, very often they want to stay away from the others in order to re-establish their own intimacy, their own identity. But this private language turned to occupy too much time, depriving social communication and impeding the enrichment of linguistic means as well as academic improvement.

Anyway, because Anthony had become too much dependent on his twin brother, the two were put in different classrooms. This decision had a catastrophic and devastating consequence for both of them. They felt to have lost their identity. They were deprived of their intimacy derived from a strong cooperation and a deep complicity; a complicity, which regulated both their behaviour and their language. Thus, in order to re-gain their unique relationship, they tried to negate other people much more than before. In so doing, their linguistic communication became more cryptic and personal. They used to spend longer time by themselves, and negative academic result was the consequence. At the end of the year their written works had gone back to a kindergarten level. Their drawings also showed isolation, in fact, each of them had always a central image, the one representing a hole; a hole which moved crossing the sheet of paper from side to side. This hole, however, was not dark and did not look miserable, rather it was full of colours and flowers. It was a sort of cave in which they felt sure and protected, in which their personality could develop without constrictions, without chains, in which their identity could never be directed towards a line other people have decided for them.

We have to understand that the very nature of dizygotic twins is based on physiological details first of all; details, which constrain their own psychological attitude towards themselves, people and environment. When we separate twins in the hope to drive them to an independent life, we add stress and sorrow. We do nothing more than emphasizing the problem of separation (Gedda eds). They live this separation as we live the separation from a loved one when this person dies. It is a difficult problem. Perhaps, one way to solve it might be to solve to consider and accept their strong relationship, without negating it. Thus, letting them live their life being conscious that they, even though they are much alike to one another, however, are two separate persons who are able to live a separate life reacting to life in different ways, will surely help them. Giving them freedom is much more useful than directing them all the time. Accepting similarities and sameness is the same as accepting diversity. To build up identity means also to accept sameness naturally without stressing this situation too much.

It is impossible to separate twins; then, why should we separate them? Their intrauterine life started together from the same sperm and the same egg-cell being nourished by the same blood. Many scientific studies, in fact, have revealed that twins, even separated at birth and living in two different countries ignoring each other, once they discover their twin situation, going back to their past lives, easily associate some unexplained psychological as well as physiological symptoms to what had happened to one of them in the past.

Recently, during a school meeting I have met a colleague who told all of us that he would get married the week after exams. He talked about his wedding suit, all the arrangements of the
ceremony, how stressed he was feeling now and, even more, he gave us details about his future wife. He said that she is very nice and she is a lawyer. He was so convincing that nobody suspected him. At last, we discovered that it was not him, who was going to get married but his twin brother. Our colleague lives far from his twin brother, he has a totally different life, but notwithstanding this, he still feels closely involved with him. Is that a fault? Who was responsible for that? The mother who gave birth to two twins? Can you answer these questions? The colleague is an independent man, has an independent life, has his own identity, even though sometimes he is affected by his brother’s life. A stressful childhood situation, insisting on the necessity to be different, trying to give twins separate but unnatural experiences might cause more problems, thus, leaving the children isolated with the only aim to ignore either one another or the rest of the world. But, is ignoring the ‘other’ the right way to gain personality, identity and prestige? Rather, ignoring the other could develop identity pathologies, because it is an unnatural condition as we will see in the next section with schizophrenic subjects.

Going back to the issue concerning private language, I want to point out that private language used and invented by twins is a well known process studied by many researchers. It is a process, which strengthens their privacy and enlarges their own fantastic world. It has also been the object of a famous French film (*Poto and Cabengo*) in which the director (Jean-Pierre Gorin) describes the secret language of a pair of twins in San Diego in 1979.

“From early childhood, these twins had invented a ‘code’ which sounded so foreign that at first people thought they had developed a new language. (…) They spoke rapidly in staccato burst. By slowing down the tapes and analysing them word by word, their secret ‘language’ turned out to be ordinary English mixed with German (their family was bilingual), but spoken fast and with many repetitions and such altered stress on individual syllables that the words took on the opposite emphasis to normal” (Wallace, 1988: 13).

Two more girls, also described by Wallace, had invented their own secret language to protect themselves once they have “found themselves in a new environment with no familiar faces, and little sympathy among their peers for children who did not speak properly and had black skin. They were laughed at in class and bullied and baited in the playground. They were forced to cling even more tightly to the safe world of each other, to strengthen the walls of their twinship and to withdraw behind them. They stopped trying to communicate with the outsiders and, even within the family, became more isolated. Gloria and Aubrey would hear them chatter endlessly to one another and to their dolls, but could only make out occasional word. It was as though they had deliberately distorted their speech into a secret code to prevent others from understanding it” (idem: 12).

These two cases are clearly associated with bilingualism, second language learning and immigration, because they point out that cultural context is the focal point of any linguistic situation. In fact, a twin situation is inevitably linked to problems. And, as stressed above, language, being the most intimate aspect among cognitive development, is also the most vulnerable human trait to be affected.

4) Schizophrenic population and Identity

The fourth situation concerns schizophrenic population and is linked to the ones above analyzed because it is the consequence of an exaggerated condition in which the subject feels isolated and takes refuge in his own language and in his own world. Once, the subject realizes that his/her expectations are accepted and understood by other people, and a warm atmosphere wraps her/him, identity seems to be re-gained (Piro, 1967).

Identity is a very difficult word. It implies the whole life of each person considering every detail of his/her experience: place of birth, language, family, friends, education, leisure time, and consequently behaviour, feelings, reaction to inputs, ways of dressing, hair style, body decoration and so on. Identity is so great a problem, that even from the juridical point of view the identity card
tries to figure out the main traits of people. But, knowing the name, the date and place of birth is not enough, even though they are data which help constructing a kind of identity. The photo on the ID adds more details. But these are only external features.

What is inside a human being is very difficult to disclose even to ourselves. In fact, it is not so easy to know what we really are and what we really want. Further, it would be much easier to understand others if we try to understand ourselves first. In fact, many times we find ourselves asking why we have reacted in that specific way to a certain situation or why we don’t remember such important matters happened not so long ago. It is our unconscious that selects the items for us. It chooses the ones we like and separates us from the ones which disturb our emotions. According to our own experience, those uncomfortable events are too heavy for us to carry on. How many times, the answer given by people to our problems, unveils the concept that, what afflicts us is not considered a problem, and it is not even worth considering it. This implies that the things which worry someone should not be isolated from the whole of the subject’s life background. It is the same concept concerning some phobias people accuse: phobias, which are unreasonable for most people. For example there is a subject who is terrified when incidentally plumes touch him. He confessed me once, that he could even throw himself from the 11th floor, if someone would touch him with a plume. Viewed from the external point of view, this is an irrational behaviour, because plumes are of no danger to anybody. He told me that he can understand that plumes are harmless and inoffensive, but, notwithstanding this, he is totally shocked any time he is near even one of them. He is continually scorned by people, who consider him handicapped for this unusual and incomprehensible phobia. His identity had been mined by a simple event he cannot remember. An event he could remember very vaguely, may be happened when he was a very young child and linked to his grandmother fanning the fire with a big black plume fan. He is an intelligent boy, but in such occasions he seems to lose both control and identity looking like a subject with apparent disorders.

All this discussion just to say that behaviour, and above all, language have to be evaluated by considering in a very analytic way the total expressions of the subject’s life. It is very difficult to evaluate a single person just analysing language out of context, because the linguistic expressions we use are not only the standard reflex of the formal grammar belonging to our mother tongue; rather they are the sum of our experiences as lived by each of us. We talk with the same intonation our people use; we formulate a specific vocabulary reflecting the most common expressions used within our environment, which in turn, reflect the context in which we live. We build up a selection of particular items, which, while belonging to the mother tongue system, have acquired a particular value within a particular setting. If we avoid all these considerations, it will be very difficult to alleviate and stimulate the people who need our help. Another mistake comes from the fact that very often we try to understand people only by conversing with them, taking apart all other details which are as useful as language. In fact, as said above, if we paid great attention to the way people dress, or comb their hair or manipulate their external appearance, we would understand them much more, and consequently help them by correcting their attitude towards the world (D’Acierno, 2004).

Paralinguistic and kinetic signs are as important as language; they also show our identity, and we don’t realize that very small features speak of us much more than words.

“Signs shape our lives” says Keller in a Theory of Linguistic Signs. “This is true not only of the signs of language: we are surrounded by signs, we surround ourselves with signs, and usually we are completely unaware of them. Frequently, we become aware of the complete semiotic saturation of our lives only when the signs we use, and with which we surround ourselves, lead to unexpected interpretations. My car is a sign, and so is my bicycle. Even if I have no car, this too is a sign. Eating oysters is just as much a sign as gorging hamburgers. It’s a sign when I wear a tie, and just as much as when I refrain from wearing one. The same is true of jeans, suits and corduroy pants. Some people might protest, “Does everything I do have to mean something?” (Keller, 1998:1).
The relation between clothing and the human body is full of implications. Covering the body with clothes and ornaments focuses on the very nature of human beings; a nature which gives great importance to signs: those impressed on the skin, on the naked body, and those relating to clothes. Nudity, in general is not accepted by most cultures, and a naked body is an ancestral sign. On the stage, the nude is permitted only providing the actors do not move, and this again wants to communicate the audience the actors’ strong assimilation to the role interpreted. It is not a case that theatre plays an important role with people showing behavioural troubles.

“Wandering about without clothes, or even ripping them off, is the expression of uneasiness and sorrow. … But, this is not only the case of being dressed or in the nude; the argument is that any state of dress might be proper or improper according to the situational content; thus, marking the individual’s allocation of involvement, and consequently her/his orientation to the social occasion examined. Clothing, as much as language, gestures, facial expressions, stance and glance, is an important means of communication; it carries much of the burden of expressing orientation of both the subject and the object within a communicative situation. While linguistic messages are felt to be voluntary and intended, much of expressive message is uncalculated, spontaneous, and involuntary. … The difference between linguistic and paralinguistic means of interaction is that, while linguistic communication follows the rules of the language, paralinguistic means are more spontaneous, and, as a consequence, are attached to personality and cultural details: …”(D’Acierno 2004: 117-120).

Going back to our topic, the one concerning people in search of identity, the problem with them is that they are more spontaneous when they use language than when they have to dress themselves. In a mental health center they do not have the chance to wear whatever they like, so when they are exasperate, it is easier for them to get nude. There are many of these examples; people who have lost any link with the social context and try to find their identity in the essence of their body, even getting in touch with their own faeces. The only thing they can choose and manipulate is the language. At that point, they use it as they like, uttering sentences after sentences which seem not to have any rational connection neither from the grammatical nor from the logical point of view. When they talk with someone, they desperately try to construct their personality, their identity, and they look very depressed when they realize they haven’t achieved any result.

Understanding the language of schizophrenic people is not so easy, it takes a long time and great participation. If you are in a hurry, because you think that they are only mad people, you will never achieve any result. They are, first of all, human beings in need of help. The most important thing is that you have to show them that you are a real friend, a person they can relay on. You are their last chance, and if you are able to gain their trust, you will really help them. Then, it is urgent to spend many hours with them trying to know and understand every tiny detail of their past life as well as their actual environment when they have the occasion to go back to their families. It is not easy, I know, there are many problems, but first of all you have to cut out all the stereotyped and fixed prejudices about them: they are like you; they only need help.

“Not understanding mental health patients is, therefore, the result of prejudices, superficiality, hurry, ignorance, mental indolence, disengagement on the side of the people who have the role to cure them” (Piro, 1992: 31).

In order to better explain this point, I want to tell you my personal experience at the Scuola Antropologico-Trasformazionale run by professor Piro. At the beginning of my participation at the school meetings, during one session, one of the patients, coming inside the room, interrupted our discussion by asking Piro questions. Piro didn’t answer his questions, rather he reproached him by saying that he had already told him not to come inside the room while there was a meeting. It happened several times and I thought that Piro should not be so strict with a patient living in the Mental Health Center. Then, I asked him the reason of his reaction, which seemed abnormal to me. He simply said that you have to consider patients like normal people, because they are able to distinguish between what they are and what they are not allowed to do. If you give them
confidence, said Sergio Piro, it will be easier to establish a close relationship with them and consequently ‘to enter’ their past life through their eyes. Sometimes, they alter reality, trying to see it not as it is, but as they very much want it to be.

Very often schizophrenic patients have been defined as people with a double personality. Consequently, any time they change mask, also their linguistic expression changes. But this is an old theory. Nowadays, it has been proved that the mask is the reflex of a changing situation. Having more than one mask, Piro says, is a good sign. It means that the subject is able to recognize different contexts, putting the mask which seems more suitable to the actual situation. In other words, if the external context changes, the patient adapts to it by utilizing the most appropriate mask and by adopting the right mental habit and the right language.

We have tried to help these patients, not only by establishing a very close relationship with them through confidential meetings showing great cooperation, but also analyzing their written production before de-institutionalization. These writings, ranging from essays to notes, from books to proverbs, show a significant difference between their personality before and after entering the mental health center.

“There was a big gap between their way of writing, which was, most of the time accurate, and their decaying behaviour, which was very poor and depressing. Their writings were an accuse to reclusion, strait-jacket, but above all to the forced laziness of the mental health context” (Piro p. 51). Their written notes “notwithstanding their strange and incomprehensible language, proved these people to be alive and full of expectations, because they looked around to participate to every day life events” (Piro p. 52).

Antonio, one of those patients had written quite a big book called Sillabario (alphabet) full of very deep thoughts:

“That death that does not come! Death is the food of Gods, because Gods do not love humanity, since humanity is finished. Man is the saddest of all the humanized beasts, because he has a brain, and this brain does not go further than the ray of a pomegranate, which has a thousand suns and a thousand beans for health, which the human mind is not able to understand, but these beans restore soul so thirsty of knowledge and pleasure.”

Another patient, Assunta, used, during her verbal communication, sentences coined on proverbs; when she could not remember them, she either invented proverbs or constructed her sentence in the form of a proverb. So, when asked about her health she replied: ‘a closed woman, sick is.’ The language of these people is generic and abstract; they like to introduce metaphors, metonymies and symbolic expressions. They like to invent words, play with language, and adapt it to their interior atmosphere; that is why if you do not establish a Synthetic relationship their linguistic expressions result obscure and incomprehensible (Piro, p. 54).

Synthetic relationship is the term coined by Sergio Piro to describe a balanced relationship established between the observer and the patient. He adds that it is not easy to achieve a good relation with all patients, some refuse it at all, and he suspects that the cause comes from their staying in the hospital.

Another patient used to insert the word ‘mozzarella’ in many different situations. At first, it seemed impossible to understand the meaning of his sentences, rather it turned to be a very simple matter. After a quick analysis of his familiar environment, it was discovered that the word mozzarella in his dialect was synonym of lazy people, even though he linked this word to a variety of contexts and contents.

Here is the case of another patient who was a lawyer. He had two totally different behaviours, one when he was in hospital, and one when he was at home in his familiar context. At home he seemed to re-gain his real identity, because of the great esteem the people of his county showed

*I say want and not would like, because I want to emphasize their strong will.*
him. These favourable opinions gave him confidence and helped him to show his personality and his identity. At home he was able to adapt his language to the situation around him, as it happens to bilingual people who change language according to the inputs received. Everyone of us might change mask: “Everyone is more than one, everyone is many, everyone is a prolixity of the self” (Piro: 23). The case of this lawyer attests the importance of de-institutionalization, because the subject has the chance to go back to his familiar place, a place which stimulates him. He knows that his words have a consequence, because someone is listening to him and most importantly understands him. Going back to the place of birth re-establishes a sense of security, of warmth, because patients know that their language as well as their behaviour will have a consequence.

In brief, I can affirm that freedom of talking, freedom of behaving, freedom of moving are essential ingredients everyone needs in order to be encouraged, and thus, stimulated to re-establish self-confidence and self-esteem. In so doing, patients are helped to re-gain their lost identity. We can conclude from all the cases examined referred to either bilingualism or migration, to either twins or pathological states, that one of the main objects of human beings is to possess a secure and reliable identity. In fact, once we realize that our identity is mined, a state of confusion and depression assaults us and we wander all around desperately searching and looking for our identity.

As we have demonstrated, even ‘obscure’ language has an effective meaning. If the observer wants to re-construct the identity of schizophrenic people, h/she has to apply two strategies: 1) to consider them human beings living in human places surrounded by people who love them and know their life in every detail; 2) to be aware of their experience, so that it will be easier to examine their language, describing the context in which they lived in the past. If we compare their language to that we use within our family, or to that used by twins (criptophasic), we can better understand the point. In fact, even though the former is imprecise and ambiguous from both semantics and grammar, communication is not compromised, because everyone in the family knows the context. In fact, a casual listener is unable to understand the core of this particular speech act. The latter is more complicated, because twins are very careful not to disclose their secret language to anybody, so to maintain their close relationship.

During the observation of schizophrenic population, it resulted that what was considered absolutely obscure at the beginning, after a while had acquired meaning, since the observer had been deeply involved within the patients’ past life experience. Then, another important point has been evidenced. When they leave the hospital even for a short time and are re-introduced into their familiar context, their language changes, too, because they are helped to re-gain their identity.

In sum, it has been established that isolation, imposition, lack of stimuli, unfamiliar context, determine a split of personality, and consequently language is not capable to adequate to the new situation. At last, we can associate these patients to either migrants or bilingual people or twins, whose language appears ‘obscure’ for all the reasons above examined. Migrants, because they feel frustrated for not being fully integrated within the host social context in which people speak a language different from their mother tongue. Bilinguals (only the ones living in an unclear, undefined context), because they feel that their language is an object of discussion, and twins, because the familiar constrictions provoke the search for a ‘world’ they consider more protected against external influences. All these subjects develop a sense of insecurity and anguish. The above situations faced from the wrong side might cause confusion, depression, perplexity, anguish and provoke pathological states. The first element to be affected is of course language.

Conclusions

After analysing these four aspects, we might conclude that any ambiguous, unclear, hostile, cold, narrow and compelled atmosphere limits the subject’s real linguistic as well as behavioural capacities. Cultural traits “must” be linked to linguistic items, because, even during foreign language learning in a school situation, they give value to the words, thus building up a concrete and real environment. If language is only a series of words, it lacks complicity. It becomes a simple
manipulation of sentences without sense. The subject feels this manipulation and starts to lose balance, and consequently identity. Some of the above situations have two aspects, one positive and one negative. In fact, they can offer either stimuli improving personality or sharp hedges constricting and impoverishing mind, linguistic and behavioural attitude. When, even a small detail, implied during the growth process, is not correct or does not combine with the subject’s nature, terrible consequences might be poured on him/her. Language, Identity and Personality remain so mined that the subject is left in a confused state and in a desperate search for re-gaining identity.

Just a small opening in the future is enough to give ‘life,’ ‘oxygen’ to people suffering any kind of trouble. Being able to plan our future and realize that our expectations might have a consequence give a strong input to our emotions and turn even the most desperate situation into a serene attitude.

“On 19th September 1983, I visited June and Jennifer. Jennifer looked plump in the face and her eyes were dulled, but she quickly came alive at the talk of using their diaries for a book and the possibility that some of her writings might be published. June was still in the intensive-care unit. Her face looked swollen, her hands were shaking and she scarcely spoke, but she handed me a book of poems she had written. When I read them on the train back to London, my eyes were stinging. The ‘September Poems’, sometimes three or four in one day, were filled with a poignance and melancholy which seemed far from what I would have expected of a dangerous psychopath.

I am immune from sanity or insanity
I am an empty present box; all
Unwrapped for someone else’s disposal.
I am a thrown away egg-shell,
With no life inside me, for I am
Not touchable, but a slave to nothingness.
I feel nothing. I have nothing, for I am
Transparent to life; I am a silver streamer on a balloon; a balloon
which will fly away without any
oxygen inside. I feel nothing,
for I am nothing, but I can
see the world from up here” (Wallace, 1988: 227).

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Gedda L. all the publication of the *Mendell Institute*, Roma.


