English L2 personas and the imagined global community of English users

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Do L2 users feel 'like a different person' when speaking in English?

Introduction

I have Danish parents, grown up in France, lived in the UK for 10 years and now living in Holland for the past 9 years. I am a different person in each language, adapting myself to the culture of the people who speak it. I have always wondered how the language could affect the message so much. It also affects my tone of voice and my emotions. [Christina, on July 27th, 2011]

I find myself being more self-depreciating and less likely to accept praise when speaking in Japanese than when speaking in English. Furthermore, a colleague once told me that even if he can't hear, he can tell which language I am using from 10-15 metres away, by looking at my posture, gestures and general body language. [Tim, on July 27th, 2011]

My friends once told me that when I switch to Russian even my facial features change, becoming colder and harsher – set jaw, narrow eyes, speaking in a low voice, but with an intensity that makes everyone else listen. [Julia, on July 30th, 2011]

The above quotations represent just a small portion of blogosphere postings from bilingual and multilingual individuals commenting on how they perceive and appear to have very distinct and separate personalities when speaking the different languages in their linguistic repertoires. Many such postings, like the first one above by Christina, explicitly attribute this phenomenon to attempts on the part of speakers to assimilate to the cultural norms of the countries where the languages are traditionally spoken. Scholarly

treatments of the same phenomenon (e.g., Bryant, 1984; Hu & Reiterer, 2009; Zukowski/Faust, 1997) generally do likewise, often citing Schumann's (1978, 1986) Acculturation Model, which equates L2 proficiency with the extent to which a learner is able to adopt the culture of a target language group, and Guiora's (1967, 1979) concept of Language Ego, in which the permeability of one's L1 identity determines receptiveness to taking on new linguistic identities. According to these theories, a learner of Korean, for example, would be likely to develop a distinctly Korean L2 persona (as well as linguistic proficiency) if he or she has both a high level of affinity for Korean culture and a very permeable L1 language ego. Such arguments still, no doubt, apply to languages such as Korean or Japanese that are intrinsically associated with specific

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countries and cultures. Given the status of English as an international lingua franca in today's world, however, it can no longer be assumed that learners of English have any motive or desire to acculturate into traditionally English-speaking cultures, such as those of the US, England, or Australia. If learners/users of English associate the language not with such traditionally English-speaking cultures, but instead with an imagined global community of English users, do they still develop English L2 personas that are distinct from their L1 personas and feel 'like a different person' when speaking English?

The imagined global community of English users

The term *imagined communities* was originally coined by Benedict Anderson to describe the way in which citizens of nations conceptualize a national community. Such a community can only be described as imaginary, Anderson (1991: 6) argues, 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. More recently the interpretation of imagined communities has been expanded to not only include the imagining of people and communities that actually do exist *in the present*, but also the imagining of social relationships in communities that might exist *in the future*. With the notion of imagined communities, identity researchers now have an appropriate theoretical construct in which to explore the link between identity and desire – our hopes and dreams for the future that undeniably impact our actions and perceptions of ourselves while we are still very much grounded in the present. Commenting on the communities that different L2 users envisioned for themselves in two separate studies (Norton, 2000 and Kanno, 2003), Kanno & Norton (2003: 243) assert that 'these images profoundly affected the learners' investment in the target language and their concomitant actions and learning trajectories'.

Attempting to explain what motivates the legion of English learners in EFL contexts, Ryan (2006) takes the imagined community concept one step further, proposing that it is a sense of membership in an imagined global community of English users that compels many EFL learners to expend considerable efforts learning the language. Joining Csizér & Dörnyei (2005), Lamb (2004), and Yashima (2002), Ryan contends that for young people in much of the world today, the English language is increasingly associated not with any particular geographic area or culture, but instead with an international global culture and community – one in which, as citizens of the world, they are already at least legitimate charter members. But what are the English language requirements for full membership in such a global community? Who must one be capable of communicating with, on what topics, and in what situations? Since each English learner/user has his or her own unique vision of what constitutes this imagined community, conditions of membership, of course, vary wildly and are subject to constant re-evaluation based on individual perceptions and experiences. An English learner/user whose orientation toward English is as a member of an imagined global community of English users could very well develop a distinct English L2 persona based on acculturation into what he or she individually perceives to be the pragmatic norms and culture of this imagined global community. Language Ego would still play a crucial role in determining whether a distinct English L2 persona emerged, for an impermeable L1 identity would prevent the learner/user from willingly adopting *any* new interactional styles or practices, regardless of what sort of community he or she associates these styles and practices with.

Acculturation and accommodation

To illustrate the concept of developing an English L2 persona based on acculturation into what an English learner/user perceives to be the pragmatic norms and culture of an imagined global community of English users, I present the case of Audrey,[1] a female Taiwanese informant who, at the time of our interviews, worked as an event promoter at a nightclub in Taiwan that catered to a largely foreign clientele. As a result of working at this establishment and regularly attending its club events, Audrey had amassed a large number of foreign friends and acquaintances from a variety of Western (but not necessarily traditionally English-speaking) countries – South Africa, Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, and Norway. She told me that, when communicating in English, she felt like a very different person than she did speaking Mandarin Chinese and attributed this to the fact that, as a group, her community of foreign friends and acquaintances were far less sensitive than most Taiwanese. She described her Chinese self as 'caring about other people's feelings...more sensitive' and explained, 'I guess Chinese feelings

are really easy to hurt 'cuz even myself, it's the same.' Audrey's English self, in contrast, was much more loose and carefree since she didn't feel the need to tread so lightly when she communicated with her foreign friends and acquaintances. 'I guess I would be more comfortable with foreigner friends,' she told me, ''cuz I can be myself more...With foreigners, you can say whatever you want to say...They don't take things that serious, so you can joke lots.' When I spent time with Audrey and a group of some of her foreign friends, I saw exactly what she was referring to when she made these comments. Audrey and these friends shared a jocular sort of camaraderie, joking and giving one another a hard time in a jovial way. Totally absent were concerns about saving face that are so often present in interactions between Taiwanese.

Audrey's loose and carefree English L2 persona then could be conceptualized as resulting from her successful attempt at acculturating into a specific group – one that she considered representative of an imagined global community of English users. Since it was only 'Chinese feelings' that Audrey saw as being so delicate, she quite naturally reasoned, based on her individual perceptions and experiences, that enhanced sensitivity was not necessary when interacting with anyone who is not Taiwanese/Chinese (the international community). When she did occasionally encounter English interactional practices that conflicted with her conceptualization of community norms, Audrey regarded them as mere anomalies. On one occasion, for example, she accompanied her Anglophone South African boyfriend to South Africa to visit his family and found that the role she had granted English of expressing her 'casual self' had to be temporarily suspended, for in interactions with her boyfriend's parents, she was expected to be far more polite than she was ever used to being in English. This, Audrey told me, was not an easy adjustment for her to make. Phrasing requests and offers politely, for example, took quite a bit of getting used to for her. 'In Taiwan, I pretty much say, *Do you want some Milo? Do you want something? Do you want blah blah blah?*' she explained. 'I never say, *Would you like* – never ever!' Although Audrey was able to adjust to more polite English forms of speech for the duration of this visit, she considered her boyfriend's parents' interactional practices to be freakish exceptions rather than substantial enough evidence for her to alter her conceptualization of an imagined global community of English user norms. Should foreign

English users with similar practices or sensitivities similar to that of Taiwanese enter her circle of friends in substantial numbers (substantial enough that she could not consider them merely anomalies), Audrey would be forced to re-evaluate her perceived norms for interaction in her conceptualization of the imagined global community of English users and perhaps alter her English L2 persona somewhat to account for this re-evaluation.

Audrey's English L2 persona could alternatively be conceptualized as resulting from accommodation (Giles et al, 1991) – adopting the speaking styles and paralinguistic features of interlocutors in an attempt to decrease social distance. Another informant, Kurt, a German who lived in the US for over ten years before moving to Japan, unequivocally attributed his English L2 personas to accommodation. During his stay in America, Kurt, unsurprisingly, associated the English language strongly with the US and American culture. Reflecting back on that time, Kurt reported, 'I think in the U.S. I adopted a persona that is more like that of an American and different from my German persona.' Acknowledging that accommodation is indeed a highly effective strategy in any intercultural communication context, he went on to explain, 'I think body language, intonation, etc. needs to be more in tune with the surroundings to communicate what is intended. But I'm not actively trying to do that. It just happens.' Upon moving to Japan though, Kurt shed the American cultural associations he had previously held for English and came to view the language more as an international lingua franca. In keeping with his habit of being 'in tune with the surroundings', Kurt's English L2 persona became tinged with distinctly Japanese mannerisms. As he told me, 'Now being in Japan I think I tried to adjust to the Japanese behaviors a bit more even when speaking English.'

The influence of linguistic features on speakers' behaviors

Features of languages themselves represent another factor that could contribute to the development of a distinct English L2 persona for an individual whose orientation toward English is as a member of an imagined global community of English users. The extremely hierarchical nature of Japanese society, for example, is encoded in the Japanese language, which has gender-specific first and second person pronouns and particular polite, honorific, and humble forms (*keigo*) that

speakers feel compelled to use when interacting with superiors. The value that Japanese society places on vagueness and indirectness is also reflected in the huge number of vague and indirect set phrases in the Japanese lexicon, which encourage users to conceal their true feelings. English, in contrast, has neither gender-specific first or second person pronouns nor a rigid system of hierarchical forms. While it is certainly possible to express extreme politeness in English or be quite vague with the use of the passive voice, the English lexicon has relatively few set phrases that are highly polite or especially vague. Even if a speaker has no interest whatsoever in adopting American-style directness and retains, when using English, traits such as modesty that are highly valued in Japanese society, he or she would still, I believe, be very likely to feel like a somewhat different person when using a language that is not encoded to reflect gender or hierarchical relations. Several of my Japanese informants with decidedly international orientations toward English reported that using English allowed them to feel liberated from the hierarchical constraints of the Japanese language and society. Moe, a female Japanese university student, for example, said that she did feel like a different person when she used English and attributed this to the fact that English had no equivalent to *keigo* or a need to express *senpai*/*koohai* (senior/junior) relations. 'I like English,' she told me, 'because English speakers do not have to care about *keigo* or something like that, and we can call an older student just only his or her name. However, in Japanese we have to call an older student *Senpai*.' Jiro, a male Japanese university student, expressed similar sentiments:

> Considering Japanese society, which is strict and hierarchical, when you speak to older people, we are required to speak *keigo* – an honorific expression. I found that it forces me to hide a real mind from them…Speaking English doesn't prevent myself from having a free voice compared to *keigo*…Speaking English enables me to express myself frankly, but it is slightly different from 'me' – like more friendly.

Another Japanese informant, Kenji, told me that he felt the different grammatical structures of Japanese and English forced him to unwillingly become a somewhat different person when using the two languages. This is due to the subject-object-verb word order of Japanese and the fact that, since Japanese is an agglutinative language, a variety of pragmatic endings can be attached to the end of a verb, potentially making huge differences in the impact of an utterance. Kenji explained that because all this important information is located at the end of a Japanese utterance, he was able to observe an interlocutor's reaction during the first portion of the utterance and choose an appropriate verb and verb ending based on these observations. With English, however, the word order is subject-verb-object and pragmatic softeners, such as modals, need to be placed before the verb. These differences, he claimed, caused him to feel like and appear to be a rather insensitive person when using English. The grammatical structure of English simply forced him to choose his words before he had a chance to accurately read his interactional situations.

Language Ego and L2 personas

As previously stated, I believe that an impermeable L1 identity does work to prevent language learners/users from adopting new L2 personas. Although Kenji did feel that he had a distinct English L2 persona, his adoption of this persona was not done willingly, and Kenji did indeed admit to having a rather impermeable L1 identity. Even though he had been using English socially and professionally for many years and was quite proficient in the language, Kenji stated that he was 'much too Japanese to ever be totally comfortable speaking English'.

While having a permeable L1 identity is arguably a prerequisite to adopting a positive L2 persona, it is by no means a guarantee that this will occur. Two of my informants, for example, reported being completely open to new interactional practices and not particularly attached to the interactional norms of their L1 languages, but nevertheless did not detect any distinct L2 personas when they spoke English. A female Taiwanese informant, Gigi, for example, told me, 'I have different voices and tones when I speak English, but I don't behave differently.' Some speakers might consider the 'different voices and tones' alone to constitute a slightly different L2 persona, but Gigi clearly did not. For her, these were merely small auditory features of the languages themselves that were in no way indicative of a distinct L2 self or identity.[2] A Japanese informant, Aina, similarly reported no perceivable difference in the way she presented herself in English compared to how she did so in Japanese and attributed this to the fact that she was an extremely introverted person. This, she felt, could not be changed by any mere

language. 'I'm a very shy person in Japanese, so I'm a very shy person in English too – no change,' she explained.

In my conversations with Japanese informants, I did encounter some individuals with extremely permeable L1 identities. These informants felt much contempt for the hierarchical nature of Japanese society and, therefore, embraced their English L2 personas with great enthusiasm. When I first met Eri, for instance, she viewed Japanese society very negatively, and was eager to discard all vestiges of Japanese culture from her identity. This led her to exert a great deal of effort in achieving English fluency and cultivating an English L2 persona that she thought projected a 'global' identity.[3] A semester studying abroad in Hong Kong, however, brought about an attitudinal transformation for Eri, thanks to exposure to some positive role models. These role models, American-born Chinese (ABC) exchange students also studying at her university in Hong Kong, served to remind Eri that one can be a global person while still maintaining local affiliations. As she explained:

> I was like 'I can drop anything [anything Japanese]' before going to Hong Kong, but after that I saw many ABCs. They have Chinese part of them even though they were not born in China, but they are still proud of themselves being Asian and Chinese…I really think that was amazing to have the several cultures – two or three cultures in one person. And they respect the part of themselves, so I feel I should respect the Japanese part of me.

While Eri's ultra-permeable L1 identity enabled her to adopt an English L2 persona with ease and no doubt facilitated her acquisition of English, the attitude she returned from Hong Kong with is certainly a far healthier one.

Nurturing positive English L2 personas in the classroom

Although English teachers in EFL contexts would love all their students to embrace English L2 personas with the gusto that Eri did, they certainly would not want to encourage the sort of disdain that she felt for her L1 society and culture prior to her Hong Kong experience. This would clearly be an unacceptable way to achieve pedagogical goals. At the same time, however, we also don't want students to go through their lives like Kenji, never feeling that they can ever be completely comfortable speaking English even if they reach a high level of

proficiency. We need to encourage a certain degree of L1 identity permeability in order to nurture positive English L2 personas. To accomplish this goal, we can encourage students to view cultural practices on a continuum and avoid 'better than' sorts of comparisons in our classrooms. As Zukowski/Faust (1997: para. 46) reminds us, 'the polar aspects of language are just labels for ends of a continua. Between good and bad, there is a lot of ordinary.'

Another pedagogical notion advocated by Zukowski/Faust (1997) that could help students in their English L2 persona development is that of the 'Concept Curriculum'. Since actual use of an L2 language is absolutely necessary for an L2 persona to emerge, learners must gain confidence in their communicative abilities and get as much practice as possible actually engaging in L2 interaction. This might be best accomplished on a topic-by-topic basis. In the 'Concept Curriculum', instruction is focused and individualized. By intensely focusing for sustained periods of time on specific topics that are of particular interest to students, we can help them acquire topic-specific vocabulary and confidence in discussions on these topics, creating what Zukowski/Faust (1997: para. 27) calls 'safe conversation topic islands in the vast sea of language'. As learners get more and more practice conversing about these target topics (preferably those that they could easily steer interlocutors toward in conversations outside the classroom), the comfort level and proficiency they are able to achieve when dealing with these topics can positively impact their handling of other less familiar topics and, at the same time, allow them to develop their own distinct L2 personas.

I realize, of course, that in many teaching contexts, the sort of focused and individualized instruction I describe here would not be feasible to implement. In each of our individual teaching contexts, we need to examine our environments and ask what we *can* do to create opportunities for students to gain confidence engaging in meaningful and successful target language communication. The presence of international students at some universities in EFL contexts presents the possibility of just such an opportunity. At my previous university in Japan, for instance, Japanese students and international students seldom interacted, despite a genuine desire to do so by members of both groups. Their classes were, for the most part, separate, and only the most extroverted students were able to muster up the courage to approach strangers and strike up conversations. Many are no longer

strangers to each other now though, thanks to a 'getting to know our international student friends' party. This 'mixer' was a huge success, with both groups benefiting immensely. Afterwards, I often saw mixed groups of Japanese and international students (from Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Canada, and various European countries) chatting comfortably on campus in English and Japanese – a sight that I seldom saw prior to the aforementioned party.

Another possible way to create confidence-building communication opportunities that could perhaps also provide students with positive role models of the sort Eri benefited from is to set up projects that involve Internet interaction with students in other countries. These interactions could be written or spoken – Skype, chat, email, or forum interactions. As more and more schools around the world embrace technology and invest in computers, such projects, that facilitate students' engagement as active participants in the imagined global community of English users, are increasingly feasible for many of us.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that the phenomenon discussed here is frequently referred to (here and elsewhere) as feeling 'like a different person' or 'having a different personality' when using different languages, it is more accurate, I believe, to conceptualize these differing ways of being as aspects of our personalities – or personas – that have, in fact, always been lurking within us, just waiting to be released via a new language. Often, as was the case with Audrey, an English L2 persona will be embraced as an opportunity to 'be myself more'. Other English users like Kenji may not be so thrilled with the personas their English use has brought forth. Globalization has forced many of us to accept new ways of being, and the widespread use of English as a lingua franca has made the once simple coupling of languages with particular cultures a much more complex affair. It does also, however, offer us far more opportunities to unleash the L2 personas that may be lurking within us – opportunities that might make the imagined global community of English users just a little bit less imaginary. ■

Notes

1 All informant names in this article are pseudonyms chosen by either myself or the informants themselves.

2 Interestingly, Gigi pointed out that at one point early on in her study of Italian, she did consciously attempt to adopt interactional practices she perceived as particularly Italian, telling me, 'When I started learning Italian, I did try to behave like an Italian woman, talking with gestures and speaking like a sexist, but it was all intended. I lost my disguise after a while.' Gigi abandoned her attempt at forging a new Italian L2 persona, reasoning that it was simply an act (or a 'disguise') and not a reflection of her true self.

3 Eri was quick to point out that this 'global' identity she strove for was not characterized by anything particularly American. 'It's not like American – no,' she told me. 'I want to be global – globally.' Eri, in fact, felt that adherence to the English norms of any one country would be detrimental, explaining, 'I don't need to stick with American English or British English... it'll be a disadvantage to communicate internationally in the globalized world or something, so I prefer not to have this.'

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