



Research Article

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Identity in the bilingual couple: Attitudes to language and culture

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Abstract: The article focuses on identity in bilingual couples by investigating their attitudes to language and culture. The research question asks how they make sense of their linguistic and cultural duality. Based on the data from in-depth interviews, I concentrate on the notion of identity in bilingual couplehood. I analyze excerpts of interviews produced by 24 couples of Poles with their foreign partners who reside in Poland. I investigate these couples' talk with regard to their interpretations of identities resulting from their individual life histories and private ideologies about language and culture. My data suggest that attitudes to language and culture relate to the mutual understanding in the couple. I found evidence for differences and similarities as subjectively assessed by partners, higher metalinguistic awareness, an altered perception of one's self and redefined national stereotypes. The results reveal that the couples' attitudes are geared to jointly create and negotiate identities in interaction. The article views identity from a new perspective by giving voice to bilingual couples. The novelty relies on the less studied Polish context and, in general, the explicit evaluation of one's own socialization to a different language and culture. The qualitative lens of the presented study contributes to our understanding of how individuals in intercultural couples use language to convey dual identity and accomplish social goals.

Keywords: bilingual couples, identity, language attitudes, intercultural communication, qualitative interviews

1 Introduction

Language choice for bilinguals is not only an element of effective communication, but also an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985), though the sense of belonging to a certain community and identifying oneself with it may change with time (Kemp 2009: 21). Every time bilinguals use a selected language, they establish connections between people, situations and contexts that are based on their past experiences. According to Li Wei (2012: 29), by making language choices bilinguals maintain and move the bounds of ethnic groups and personal relations as well as define their own “I” and “others” within the political, economic and historical contexts. Individual identity and group identity likewise develop through discourse understood as a dynamic process both affecting social reality and being affected by it. Language is a social activity which creates possibilities to shape the extra-linguistic reality. Therefore, bi- and multi-linguals are “social actors” (Wei 2012: 43) who negotiate “their own and other's desired self-images” (Ting-Toomey 2009: 40). For Bailey (2007: 258) social identity spans two processes, i.e. “self-ascription” about defining oneself and “ascription by others” about being defined by others. Multilinguals may look at their own multilinguality as part of their identity and identify themselves with other bi- or multilinguals with whom they do not share the same languages. As the result, they may experience ambivalence which Block

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(2007: 21) describes as “the uncertainty of feeling a part and feeling apart” (cf. Simmel 1950). Faced with that ambiguity multilinguals need to “assume” an identity and then work on it (Mathews 2000).

In light of the above, the analysis of identity boils down to the criteria that involve the way, time, and reasons for which individuals count as members of specific groups. My interest lies in the subjective interpretations of identities that developed in bilingual couples living in Poland. The aim of this study is to investigate how the partners’ attitudes to language and culture relate to the mutual understanding in the couple. I examine the couples’ talk to learn how they changed their self-perception and redefined one another’s national stereotypes. All couples are distinguished by some appreciable level of metalinguistic awareness which helps cope with differences and exploit similarities to strengthen bonds in the couple. Thus, partners tend to play down whatever makes them dissimilar and bring out elements that they gladly share. Finally, it is illuminating to hear the voices of bilingual couples themselves about their efforts to cultivate their dual identity and to fulfill their social roles.

2 Theoretical framework

The multifaceted and compounded nature of identity is a particular experience of immigrants who come to live permanently in another country. Decisions about radical changes in life make one’s identity fluctuate. Crossing the linguistic and cultural as well as physical boundaries creates the unique dimension of multilingual identity. In their host country immigrants in bilingual couples find themselves in a different cultural background where they are exposed to a different language. Even if one partner chooses to communicate in the language of the foreign partner, he or she goes through some process of a language shift that results not only from the acquisition of a new language but also from the reshuffle of other languages that they may need to use in everyday life. Bilinguals who are often defined as persons using two languages (e.g. Grosjean 1997, Kemp 2009) ascribe certain values and functions to each language, or sometimes combine them for immediate purposes and needs, rather than stick to any pre-determined language choice.

This paper acknowledges the direction of Bonny Norton’s (2013) research on identity and language learning. She focused on the construct of learner investment in language practice by multiplying the selection of identities available to language learners. Such investment is seen as a sociological complement to learner motivation (also Norton 2018). In a similar vein, Sabine Little (2020) proposed an original framework intended to scrutinize potential links between identity and different perceptions of the heritage language. Her study explored the attitudes of families toward heritage language maintenance and development.

Identity is a broad and ambiguous term that needs to comprise the complex nature of immigration decisions in a super-diverse society (Vertovec 2007). For the purposes of this paper, identity is understood as the “intergenerational transmission of a language” (Baker 2000: 49), i.e., a language that permeates through the bilingual couple. According to Giddens (1991: 190), one’s self-identity may successfully incorporate elements from different settings and integrate them into one narrative. As a result, language learners move toward an identity they envisage for themselves.

Following Block (2007: 40), language identity may be seen as a relationship that one assumes between “one’s sense of self” and the means of communication which is language. As many as three types of relationship emerge in the context of language identity, which were named by Leung et al. (1997) as *language expertise*, *language affiliation*, and *language inheritance* (cf. also Rampton 1990). Expertise refers to proficiency in a language that is welcomed by other language users. Affiliation relates to the individual’s affective attitude toward a language which is used as a result of feelings attached to a particular form of communication. Inheritance is connected with one’s background such as the family or community setting that uses a given language. More importantly, expertise, affiliation, and inheritance of a language are not interdependent. The fact of being born to a place does not go hand in hand with one’s expertise in a language or positive affiliation. One may also inherit a language, but have no expertise in it. This makes language identities prone to dramatic shifts during one’s life as in the case of immigrants. They are born

into their language communities where they inherit their languages and possibly acquire fluency in them. However, having moved to a different country they develop a genuine affiliation and command of another language.

As an element of culture, language plays a key role in the socialization of individuals as well as in defining self-awareness of a group and its sense of unity. The studies of second language acquisition show that the success in language learning is connected with the degree to which learners identify themselves with a group speaking a particular language (cf. Schumann 1986). By way of explaining his theory, Schumann (1978: 34) writes about his *acculturation model* in the following words: “Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target-language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language.” As a sociopsychological model, acculturation is realized in terms of social distance (becoming a member of the group speaking the target language) and psychological distance (circumstances of second language acquisition). Due to the growing multilingualism and multiculturalism of societies in today’s world, both theories and empirical data indicate that the cultural structure of multiethnic groups, workplaces, and educational institutions engender identities distinguished by divisions, hybridity, and liminality (Aronin 2007: 16, Kasper and Omori 2010: 460). Discussion about biculturalism revolves round the question whether bilinguals interact with two or more cultures, or whether they function solely within one culture. Grosjean (2008: 235) observed an “adaptable and controllable” aspect in bilinguals that helps them adapt to a context. The other aspect in bilinguals is static and represents a combination of features from both cultures. The static aspect is constant and inflexible, which explains the fact that why bicultural persons cannot always adapt to all behaviors and attitudes imposed by the cultural situations they experience. This aspect brings out the disparity between bilingualism and biculturalism. In other words, it is much easier to deactivate one language to use only the other one in some situations, while it is not possible to deactivate the other culture completely in a monocultural setting.

Many people use two or more languages on a daily basis when living just in one culture. That is why not every bilingual is bicultural. Nevertheless, many bilingual persons, such as first-generation immigrants, are bicultural, which has an impact on their bilinguality. In the opinion of Grosjean (2008, 2010, 2015), bilinguals can be defined by three features. One, they take part in the life of both cultures to a different extent. Two, they at least partly adjust their values, attitudes, behaviors, and languages to their lives in both cultures. Three, they blend the elements of both cultures. As a result, certain aspects come from either one or the other culture, or are a combination of both. Thus, I could hear from some partners in bilingual relationships the statements like “I see myself different in his language” or “I never had this Italian temperament that is so much theirs; I was completely someone else.” That is why biculturals adapt to certain situations by integrating their two cultures. Indeed, it is quite rare that two cultures are equally important to a bicultural person. When one of the cultures means more we can talk about cultural dominance in the same way as we talk about language dominance in bilingual persons.

3 Data, participants, and site of study

The emic perspective of this study takes into account the viewpoints of participants with regard to their experience of bilingual couplehood (Morris et al. 1999). In the emic perspective the couples are “heard on a par with those of the researchers” (Pavlenko 2002: 297), and thereby contribute to the analysis by making a metalinguistic insight into their own bilinguality. Thus, the obtained data are valued not for objectivity but for the subjective meanings rendered by the participants (Cruickshank 2012, Kvale 2007). The interviews aimed to reveal subjective experiences from the viewpoint of bilingual couples. Caduri (2013) argues that the “truth” in qualitative research depends on narratives, because people remember and choose what to share in interviews.

The in-depth semi-structured interview was the main method of data collection. The interviews were conducted with 24 couples selected via judgment sampling, i.e., whenever potential participants were

available to cooperate. I also used a “snowball technique” since some of my participants recommended to me new couples whom they knew themselves (Milroy 1980). In sum, foreigners in all the couples represented 22 nationalities from six continents and the couples used seven languages. The recording time of all interviews added up to nearly 26 h (25 h 52), which gave 64 min of a mean time per interview. The interviews were conducted in Polish and translated into English. I transcribed the interviews and used NVivo 11 software to code my data in which I changed the names of the respondents. The study features 24 bilingual couples of Poles with their non-Polish partners who live in Poland. Table 1 presents the number of years in Poland lived together by these couples.

Experiences of bilingual couples gathered throughout their years spent together belong to most absorbing sociolinguistic problems. Thus, quite naturally the opinions of the non-Polish partners are of special cognitive value since they refer to different issues related to their lives in Poland with a certain “mental distance.” The foreigners in the sample were represented by sixteen men and eight women. Out of 24 foreigners in the couples with Poles, 21 of them were graduates of colleges or universities. The type of education among the target foreigners was not explicitly related to a specific level of their command of Polish. It means that a comparable number of foreigners with philological education (eight persons) and those who did not have anything to do with linguistics managed to master Polish at an equally advanced degree. All participants had contact with the languages of their partners only as adults. Some of them learnt the partner’s language earlier during the formal course of studies, and further developed Polish in real-life situations in Poland. Such cases may be deemed optimal, when the theoretical introduction to the language at a course is followed by a more practical stage in one’s everyday life. Most often the partners in a couple agree on their language of communication, though the consequences of such a decision are hardly predictable. One of the key issues is the correlation between the degree of the mastery of the language and the decision about learning a language. Thus, the sample features as many as six couples in which either partner spoke fluently his or her partner’s language. There were nine couples in which either partner had a poor or passive knowledge of the other partner’s language. And, another group included nine couples in which either partner did not know the other partner’s language. The collected data were classified and labeled as a result of open coding. The categories reflect words used by the participants and at the same time capture the phenomena that affect the quality of life among bilingual couples in Poland.

This study explores how the attitudes of bilingual couples toward language and culture may link to identity. My analysis has four facets. First, I want to learn about the attitudes to language by looking at how these couples account for their language awareness. Second, I investigate individual self-perceptions through the lens of the partner’s language. Third, I review the couples’ explanations about the use of national stereotypes in the couples. Finally, I look for evidence how these couples cope with linguistic and cultural differences in their relationships by sounding out their attitudes toward their lives shared in intercultural marriages. This fourfold design of my analysis covers the chief aspects of what I refer to as *identity in bilingual couplehood* for the purposes of the present study. Thus, the article outlines the attitudes of bilingual couples to languages and cultures they represent. The couples’ joint perspectives reveal communicative challenges as well as their motivations behind their intercultural private contact.

4 Co-constructing identity: Results

In this section, I analyze excerpts from the interviews with bilingual couples who participated in my research. The conversations revolve around the issues related to identity as the result of discourses in

Table 1: The period of time spent together by bilingual couples in Poland

Years together spent in Poland	1–9	10–19	20–29	30 and more
The number of bilingual couples	9	7	5	3

the couples' talk. By engaging in such discourse, the partners report on their joint experiences where altered identities emerge and attitudes to language and culture evolve.

In what follows I address identity as a construct peculiar to bilingual couples with Poles in the Polish context. In a qualitative examination of the data, the recurring themes of metalinguistic awareness, perception of the "self," the problem of national stereotypes, and attitudes toward differences in bilingual couplehoods were found across the interviews. In what follows, I will provide examples of each and then further discuss them in the discussion.

4.1 Metalinguistic awareness

In certain circumstances the life with two languages turns out to be beneficial not only to the linguistic knowledge *per se*, but also in terms of cognitive and social development. An important part of this development is a higher level of metalinguistic awareness, including creative thinking, communicative sensitivity, and motivated continuation of language learning.

One of the couples specially distinguished by metalinguistic awareness is the Danish couple. Katarzyna and Erik often lead animated discussions about language (Extract 1). They enrich their knowledge by talking over dubious or contentious linguistic examples. In doing so, they treat one another as experts in their own native languages. In addition, from Katarzyna's words one can infer her appreciative attitude of the fact of being in a bilingual couple just from the purely linguistic point of view (lines 1 and 2).

Extract 1: "We often talk about language"

1	Katarzyna	<i>I guess it is such a big advantage that we have different languages</i>
2		<i>and we can somehow elaborate on that and explain these issues.</i>
3		<i>And sometimes it turns out that some words which function in</i>
4		<i>one language in a particular way, are used quite differently in Danish.</i>
5		<i>We often talk about language.</i>

4.2 Perception of the "self"

Teresa argues that the way she communicates with her husband in Italian has a specific impact on them both as a couple (Extract 2), including the shaping of their joint identity in couplehood. Now after several years of life with an Italian husband, it is hard for Teresa to imagine what and how much would be different in her life if she were in a relationship with a Pole (lines 3 and 4). Even so, Teresa's assertion alone seems to be most crucial.

Extract 2: "If I had lived so many years with a Pole, I could be different"

1	Researcher	<i>Would you say that your bilingual relationship affected your identity?</i>
2	Teresa	<i>Yes, for sure. No doubt in a sense. Well, I try to imagine, yes?</i>
3		<i>If I had lived so many years with a Pole, I could be different.</i>
4		<i>I don't know, I am not able to say that.</i>

Due to the choice of Italian as their couple's language of communication, Teresa moved the borders of her relationship with her husband by simultaneously redefining her own "self." She also admits that certain aspects about her husband that she would have described as "foreign" in the past do not seem foreign to her

any more (Extract 3, lines 1, 6, and 7). As the result, Teresa's attitude toward her husband and his language has evolved substantially, which is observable even for herself (lines 9–11).

Extract 3: "Sometimes I don't see an Italian in him"

1	Teresa	<i>Sometimes I don't see an Italian in him.</i> This is interesting. And
2		Matteo likewise. He sometimes wakes up in the morning and says
3		"Damn, what am I doing here?" In general it has become natural for
4		him to function here in two languages.
5	Researcher	That's good.
6	Teresa	<i>Yes. I look at him sometimes. For example, someone who is</i>
7		<i>close by says that he is a foreigner. But I don't see that any more.</i>
8	Researcher	Maybe sometimes... He looks like a southerner.
9	Teresa	<i>But it's only appearance. To me his looks is not foreign because</i>
10		<i>it has become so normal. And the same goes for these cultural and</i>
11		<i>linguistic differences, all that fades away...</i> You see the values of that
12		person and all that connects us beyond these cultures and languages
13		rather than the differences which were at the beginning.

4.3 National stereotypes

In most couples, the partners do not look at one another through the prism of nationality or stereotypes related to nationalities. Rather, national stereotypes are often mentioned to be disproved and rejected, especially when partners do not regard one another as typical representatives of their nations. Knowledge is the main factor giving shape to attitudes toward stereotypes. The more the partners know about their cultures, the louder is their criticism of stereotypes.

For Camila the basic issue is to know if Michał's behavior reveals his character or maybe it results from his cultural background (Extract 4, lines 1 and 2). Camila is not always sure of that. She looks not only at her husband, but also observes other Poles in order to differentiate between the personal traits of Michał and the traits of more national character, i.e., typical Polish ones (lines 4, 8, and 9).

Extract 4: "Is he just like this or because Polish people are like this?"

1	Camila	<i>I don't know what these differences are either because he is Polish</i>
2		<i>or because it is just him, his characteristics.</i>
3	Researcher	Do you separate them?
4	Camila	<i>I try to think if it's one or the other.</i> For example, I know Polish
5		people. They are very concerned about what they eat, they have to
6		have vitamins, pills for every symptom they have and they are
7		constantly thinking of that. And for me this is tiring and Michał
8		is like this and <i>I don't know it's like this because he's just like this</i>
9		<i>or because Polish people are like this?</i>

If there are any straightforward references made to national stereotypes, their aim is mainly humorous or personal. Natalia and Jurij refer to such stereotypes, but they follow their private rules and use specific words (Extract 5, lines 3 and 4). However, Natalia makes it clear that certain words used between two close persons mean something different than the same words uttered by an outsider (lines 9–11). An example is the word "Russki" which is an insulting depiction of Russians in Polish, but on the other hand it may also have a strong comical effect when uttered in a friendly and jovial context.

 Extract 5: “Nobody gets offended”

1	Researcher	Do you make references to national stereotypes?
2	Jurij	Yes, we do. When I do something my wife doesn't accept she always
3		tells me that <i>I am a typical Russian. But she puts it differently, she</i>
4		<i>uses different words.</i>
5	Natalia	But in our relationship these references are not so unjust to
6		the other person. I mean nobody gets offended, if...
7	Researcher	You treat it like a play or as a way to tighten the bonds
8		of your relationship?
9	Natalia	<i>Yes, yes. For instance, if a stranger referred to Jurij in the pejorative</i>
10		<i>sense by calling him “Russki,” then for sure Jurj wouldn't like that very much.</i>
11		<i>But if I use this word in the right context, then it is quite a different thing.</i>

4.4 Attitudes toward differences in bilingual couplehood

Marek and Laura construct their identity in the couple on the basis of shared values. In Marek's opinion, he and Laura share the outlook upon “the most fundamental issues” (Extract 6, lines 8 and 9). Marek admits that in their relationship he does not refer to national stereotypes (line 3), while he realizes the existence of certain cultural differences only when a problem crops up and when “a difference stands in their way” (lines 12–14).

 Extract 6: “We have the same opinions about the most fundamental issues”

1	Researcher	Do you find the differences between one another attractive?
2		Do you try to eliminate them?
3	Marek	<i>No. Well, if they pose a problem in our communication, then yes.</i>
4		<i>In the sense of agreeing on something or reaching a compromise.</i>
5	Laura	<i>There are more advantages.</i>
6	Researcher	<i>In these differences?</i>
7	Laura	<i>Yes, yes. I think so, don't you?</i>
8	Marek	<i>I guess that we have the same opinions about the most fundamental</i>
9		<i>issues, so it is not a problem. I have a problem to answer such</i>
10		<i>questions because I don't think about it in the context of our couple.</i>
11	Researcher	<i>I see.</i>
12	Marek	<i>In principle I notice the fact that we come from different cultures,</i>
13		<i>only if unexpectedly there appears a problem related to that.</i>
14		<i>Precisely when a difference stands in our way.</i>

Maria argues that “a good relationship is based on similarities and never on opposites” (Extract 7, lines 3 and 4). In the everyday routine of duties the opposites do not prove useful and only “disturb” (line 5). Differences of cultural background may generate more serious problems, for example with regard to the place and role of a woman in the family (lines 7–9). In this respect the Spanish mentality differs from the mentality of Poles. Maria says that her husband “comes from such a country where the woman stays at home” (lines 12 and 13), and she is “totally against that” (line 14). Similarly, Felipe tends to put off everything for later, whereas Maria would like to solve matters on the spot. Maria admits that the elimination of these differences or at least some partial acceptance of them required a compromise. She and Felipe had to meet “halfway” and adjust to one another.

 Extract 7: “Opposites only disturb”

1	Maria	You know, it is attractive to meet someone for a cup of coffee and
2		someone says “In my country it’s quite different.” But, in everyday life
3		it rather disturbs than helps. We, I mean, me... <i>I am sure that a good</i>
4		<i>relationship is based on similarities and never on opposites.</i>
5		<i>Opposites only disturb.</i>
6	Researcher	Indeed? In the long run.
7	Maria	<i>Yes, in the long run. Let’s face it, because every day there is work,</i>
8		<i>children, shopping, cleaning, cooking etc. This is some kind of a rut.</i>
9		<i>And now, if it’s completely different in my country than in yours...</i>
10		For instance, I sometimes tell my husband, if he gets on my nerves,
11		that he turns out to be a sexist, though I know it’s not true, but...
12		<i>Because he comes from such a country where the woman stays</i>
13		<i>at home etc. Maybe not at present, but the generation of his parents,</i>
14		<i>and I am totally against that...</i>

In the Hindu couple Weronika reflects not only on differences in languages but also on different approaches to culture by giving the example of music. She emphasizes “the awareness of certain differences and the fact that they exist” (Extract 8, lines 11–14) and the crucial question she asks is whether they should be changed. This question is rhetorical when one realizes that certain things cannot be changed (lines 3–5). Her attitude distinguished by such awareness does not prevent problems and conflicts in the couple, yet it makes it possible to get used to them from the perspective of one’s own culture (lines 16–18).

 Extract 8: “There is awareness of certain differences and the fact that they exist”

1	Weronika	Quite so, the awareness. The problem is whether, let’s say,
2		it can be changed, because certain things... And if they should be
3		changed, yes? <i>There are certain things and they won’t change, yes?</i>
4		<i>They come from culture, sex or anything. A long time ago I realized</i>
5		<i>that these differences are not only culture. Not necessarily culture.</i>
6	Researcher	Can there be other things?
7	Weronika	I guess there is no such a situation where something wouldn’t be
8		conscious in the sense that I know that there is a difference or that
9		we understand something differently. I don’t know, we may have or
10		we do have conflicts at times, but it’s not that we don’t understand.
11		Geel! I can’t fully explain that. <i>There is awareness.</i>
12	Researcher	<i>Awareness of what?</i>
13	Weronika	<i>Of certain differences and the fact that they exist, yes? And language</i>
14		<i>is not a hindrance here, or the lack of language is not a hindrance.</i>
15	Researcher	What can be a hindrance then?
16	Weronika	<i>These differences are there and they will not necessarily change, yes?</i>
17		<i>Because they simply exist. Some differences can be felt, or different</i>
18		<i>approach to language or music, yes? This is a perennial problem.</i>

5 Discussion

In the analysis I have presented excerpts from interviews concerning identity in bilingual couples. The use of qualitative methodology made it possible to accentuate the attitudes to languages and cultures as issues of significance in bilingual couplehood. My study adopted an emic perspective as a source of information elicited directly from respondents. The presented excerpts have indicated that the target couples settle the problems related to their linguistic and cultural attitudes by themselves. Moreover, the overview of the presented data allows to specify a number of implications related to the main focus of this article. Although the study involved 24 couples, the previous section on the results featured only selected excerpts that were most illustrative of the discussed issues. It is clear that the results were not intended to give any indication of how prevalent a given occurrence is. Anyway, such an outcome would not be possible to achieve via the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing. The present discussion focuses rather on a more nuanced analysis that allows for a distinction between individual couples.

Referring to metalinguistic awareness (4.1), the results show that bilingual couples talk about languages and the way they communicate. Following Cenoz and Jessner (2009: 126), the ability to concentrate on language *per se* seems to be one of the features typical of the cognitive style represented by bilinguals as distinct from most monolinguals. Jessner (2014: 176) defines metalinguistic awareness as the ability to focus on the language form and moving one's attention between form and meaning. Individuals with metalinguistic awareness can classify words according to particular speech parts, set apart form and meaning as well as explain the function of a given word. As a result, the difference between implicit learning (informal and unconditional) and explicit learning (formal) is related to the development of metalinguistic awareness (cf. Jessner 2006). In other words, metalinguistic awareness is the source of knowledge how to approach and solve certain types of problems which themselves require specific cognitive and linguistic abilities (cf. Herdina and Jessner 2002: 64, Jessner 1997: 21). Life in a bilingual couple develops metalinguistic sensibility, especially when language becomes an object of analysis for the couple, as in the case of Katarzyna and Erik. This couple lead discussions about meanings and forms which are particularly similar in the context of Scandinavian languages. Since Katarzyna studied Swedish and her husband is a Dane, she finds many occasions to pick Erik's brains on linguistic nuances. In retrospect both admit to have spent a huge amount of time talking about languages and thereby improving their knowledge about linguistic and cultural aspects related to their homelands.

Referring to the perception of one's own self among bilingual partners (4.2), language plays the key role. In their metalinguistic comments about communication in the couple, the participants emphasize that their private language tightens the bonds of the relationship. Partners describe their language as their own personal combination of languages they use. These "hybrid" languages are usually characterized by single words or expressions. In the opinion of Cameron (2001: 172), when people talk about the aspects of identity, they enter the "meta" level of language. Then, indeed they may ponder over the language, but at the same time this fact already becomes an act of creating or developing their identity. Bilinguals struggle with the choice of the ways to show feelings and resort to diverse cultural norms of expression, which makes them go beyond the bounds of their individual emotional worlds (cf. Ting-Toomey 2009). Many couples firmly deny when asked if they have the feeling that they fail to communicate or express a message due to the lack of precision or language knowledge. In addition, the time spent together as a couple has its share in the evolving perspective of the "foreignness" of one's partner. The couple of Teresa and Matteo illustrates that both partners' languages and cultures may intertwine in all aspects of their life so that they cease to see one another as different. When Teresa says that she "doesn't see an Italian" in her husband, she reports a change in perception not only of him, but also of herself.

Referring to national stereotypes (4.3), the ideology of identity in couplehood is realized via similarities and differences, which was also validated in earlier studies (e.g. Piller 2002). Partners derive similarities from the juxtaposition of cultural relatedness and cultural distance, and by emphasizing values and attitudes of supranational character. In turn, differences are leveled by approaching them as the elements of attractiveness of one's partner, or by excluding him or her and treating as an exception to the rule, which is often seen in statements like "He is not a typical Russian" or "If he were a typical Spaniard, I wouldn't

have married him.” Discussions about identity often lead to the topic of stereotypes which are rejected by the couples as a problem that brings more harm than good. Partners see each other’s cultures as the source of enrichment and not as a burden for their relationship, which not always concerns solely the language. Individually they perceive their relationships not as the relation of two cultures, but as the relation of specific persons. The dominant intended reference to national stereotypes and their explicit use among the target couples has had primarily the humorous function, as in the case of Natalia and Jurij.

Referring to the attitudes toward differences in bilingual couplehood (4.4), the couples admit that they had to compromise on several aspects of their shared lives and adjust to one another. Years spent together in a bilingual relationship change both partners. Most of them realize the extent of these changes and the phases they have gone through. In considerations of differences in bilingual couplehood, the acculturation model proves particularly useful that was put forward by John Schumann (1986). The model is centered on an individual who learns a new language and concurrently adapts to a new culture. From this perspective learning, a second language is directly connected with the process of acculturation, and the measure of success usually reflects the degree to which the newcomer is open and oriented to the culture of the dominant language. The study shows that in their efforts to deal with the differences in bilingual couplehood, the target couples adopt attitudes of vigilance, disapproval, and acknowledgment. Namely, Marek and Laura put up with linguistic shortcomings and cultural clashes as long as in spite of them they can reach a compromise. In turn, Maria dismisses the differences in her relationship with Felipe as unwelcome and substantially reducing the chances of success in marriage. And finally, Weronika and Sareng have learnt to accept such elements of their life which are incidental, yet irremovable. Thus, in light of acculturation model these couples have reached diverse degrees of openness toward each other’s language and cultures, which makes their shared lives acceptable for both partners.

6 Conclusion

This study highlights the complex links between identity, language, and culture in terms of a conceptual framework of bilinguality in the couple. The study succeeded in achieving a satisfactory level of response from the target participant group; however, no study can claim to provide a comprehensive account of the situation of all bilingual couples in the country. Due to the qualitative method, it is not possible to argue that the study sample is representative across the full socioeconomic spectrum. But despite these limitations, the study provided a detailed account of the interrelation between language attitudes and identity among bilingual couples.

My findings reveal that attitudes to language and culture have an impact on the mutual understanding between the partners. While research on identity issues has primarily focused on either individuals or communities, my study foregrounds the need to examine more resolutely the dyadic contact of cross-lingual and intercultural relationships. The study shows that differences based on the national identity come from the fact that the partners “belong” to different national groups which are mutually exclusive. Nationality, like the national difference, is “imagined” (cf. Piller 2002: 185). Following Uri Ram (1994: 153), if we assume that nationality is a form of narration shared by people to assign meanings to their social world, then the individual stories of bilingual couples basically concern the imagining of each other as different in one’s own couple.

There are some theoretical implications to be formulated. This study contributes to research on bilingual couples in diverse contexts by exploring the complexity of shared identity in private contact of different languages and cultures. More generally, the findings emphasize that in most couples partners do not look at one another through the prism of nationality or the stereotypes related to nationality. Individual relationships are perceived not as relations of two cultures, but as relations of specific persons. National stereotypes are often mentioned only to discredit and reject them, especially if the partners do not regard one another as typical representatives of their nations. Such attitudes to stereotypes are shaped mainly by one’s knowledge and personal experience; the more one knows, the more critical one is about the

use of stereotypes. Though partners in bilingual couples are resistant to mutual differences of their languages and cultures, their parents by contrast rely strongly on symbolic national differences. For parents of bilingual couples to learn more about their daughter's or son's partner means more acceptance and more contact with their foreign daughter- or son-in-law. The stereotypical concept of the foreign culture, be it positive or negative, becomes the starting point in the long process of discovering and adjusting to individual traits of people from different cultures.

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