Uncovering the Nexus between Language Culture and Identity Difference in the Context of Ethnic Self–Experience

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ABSTRACT

In this study of the language user, the connection between language culture and identity difference is examined from the ethnic context of language learning. This study aims to reveal the connection of those notions that is essential for language learners and will contribute to the development of language education. The research method of this study is autoethnography research. The author's critical reflection as a reflective practitioner was used to elicit data by remembering and writing his personal experience. Then, the elicited data was analyzed using the theory of representation system, language culture, and identity difference. The findings of this study show that language, culture, identity, and difference have a robust linkage. The individual's different culture and identity significantly affect the way he/she uses the language in certain contexts. Therefore, uncovering the interconnection of language culture and identity differences from critical self-reflection on ethnic-based experience may enrich a better understanding of the language learning process.

KEYWORDS:
Autoethnography, language learning, culture, identity, difference, ethnicity.

Introduction

Over the past 5 years, some of my perspectives and practices have changed. I now give greater attention to the global context and am acutely aware of how difficult it can be to gain a true understanding of another culture when working outside of it. Shared research agendas, collaboration across countries, joint publications, exchange programs, and on-going conversations may be strategies to help acquire insider knowledge. (Kosnik, 2005, p. 222)

The quotation above is cited from the Krosnik work entitled the 'Balancing My Integrity and not Being Left Behind'. He asserted that his self-experience is a form of representation from the cultural identity difference of a more internationally informed teacher educator and researcher. Based on that quotation, it can be determined that language use has a robust relation to culture, identity, and difference. According to Kramsch (1998), understanding the connection of language, culture, identity, and difference is essential for language education because of the unseparated relationship between language learning and cultural understanding. The notion of language, culture, identity and difference are linked each other forming the term of representation and meaning making. Thus, the process of linking those notions should formerly discuss an integral concept of the system of representation.

The elaboration of the term "meaning-making" form a representation will essentially reveal the interconnected concepts of language, culture, identity, and difference. Hall (1997b) affirms that representation plays an essential role in human communication since it brings the common-sense meaning to any objects being exchanged through a language in communication. Moreover, Hall (2013) emphasises that the representation is established from two different system, inluding mental representation and language, that bound together to emerge meaning. The first system, mental representation, is human set of concepts that innately used to represent any particular things, objects, images, people, and so forth. The second system, language, is used to internalize the meaning of specific concepts through joint conceptual map and set of signs in terms of meaning-making in communication. Thus, language can be described as a proses of sharing meaning from human mental representation and any surrounding object, including sounds, images, objects, and words that can carry "meaning" (Hall, 2013).

For example, the conceptual map of "a cute mammal with smooth grey fur and belly pocket living in eucalytus trees" refers the combination of sounds and letters that make up the word 'Koala'. This meaning from mental representation can only be expressed and conveyed by language through a set of signs called sound and words. This set of signs can be formed through written, spoken, and visual language. The representation of 'koala' in language communication is derived from indexical signs of the written form 'K-O-A-L-A' letter and the spoken form '/koʊˈɑː.lə/' sound. Also, the visual form of a Koala from its photograph or body shape that we call it as iconic signs.

Besides, language is interchangeably dynamic regarding its three system of representation, including the concept, object, and sign, in creating meaning. It means that the object or concept as a representation will not merely carry the meaning itself, but the context where the language used as a medium of communication that provides meaning (Kramsch, 1998). This context specifically belongs to certain communities or social groups that have shared conceptual map, sign system, and object representation that dovetail those shared representation and language. As a result, meaning is constructed and formed within certain communities even though it will never be static and fixed.

Based on liguistic relativity of Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, a language of object from a community will be perceived differently by other communities. For example, colour representation in language denotes meaning in common culture and it is understood by the language user who have shared representation system in their culture. In contrast, it will probably have different meaning for other cultures that they do not denote the same system of representation.

Hence, the author will elaborate the interconnected relation between language culture and identity difference that affects the representation system for language learners. Firstly, the discussion of language

construction and meaning making is presented to further analyse how people produce shared conceptual map, code, and signs through language to communicate within their community culture. Secondly, the robust linkage between language and culture is discussed to provide the understanding of complex relationship among them occuring in social life which creates the notion of identity and leads the emergence of difference as the result of those relation. Lastly, the reflection of the author's personal experience vignettes is previewed along with its analysis based on the reflective authoethnograpic within the framework of language culture and identity difference in depth.

Language and Culture Interconnections

The discussion of culture concept can be multi-directional because it requires an understanding of the surrounding aspects when determining an individual's culture. Hall (2013) states that you belong to certain culture if you are aware of the same worldviews as other individuals in a particular culture. On the same hand, Kramsch (1998) accentuates that individuals will belong to a particular social group such as family, ethnics, race, tribes, nations, when they share similar perceptions and views during their interpersonal communication and interaction within those groups. For example, the individual's worldviews of specific language that used as their first language will possess the same conceptual map and representation system that leads to the cognate interpretation of the language meaning.

Culture is considered because of interpersonal interaction among people within a social community. The human intervention through potential innate capability in producing meaning has forged certain cultures naturally (Kramsch, 1998). For instance, *Keris* (a Javanese traditional knife) naturally means a tool or weapon with wavy double-bladed dagger. In the framework of culture concept, it possesses the next level of interpretation. Beside the superficial meaning, it can be determined as a symbol of an

individual wealth and prosperity in Javanese culture. Having an expensive and rare *Keris* items will show that the owner has higher and special social status. In addition, it means that the owner may also have supernatural and divine power by collecting the sacred and hitoric *Keris* items because it is used for a deadly important short-distance combat in the past. Although the interpretation of *Keris* has been slightly changed in the modern era, it is still recognized as a mysthical item for Javanese. Therefore, culture has two functions of constraining and deliberating towards the meaning of *Keris*. The meaning of *Keris* constrains in the form of basic definition of a traditional weapon, while it deliberates in the form of enhancing social status and containing magical power within Javanese social convention.

Kramsch (2014) asserts that the culture functions of constraining and deliberating language have roles in social, historical, and imaginary aspects. Individual that belongs to a particular social group will have the same common beliefs, attitudes, and values, which realized as a common sense because they view the world similarly. As a result, they will construct the same linguistic code that creates the speech and discourse community. Based on the aforementioned example of social convention in Javanese community,

However, the differences of individual's worldviews will ditinguish their meaning-making system from other social groups' representation system. Hall (2013) explains that linguistic code is also a product of social convention which forges historically within the culture of particular social group. Consequently, the concept of individual difference will be discussed to highlight the way of language learner understand the cultures and linguistic code of the target language that are totally different. The concept will also be used to investigate how the language learner deals with the cultural and language difference in the process of language learning.

Thus, other groups that do not possess the same shared linguistic code will probably not have the same interpretation of language meaning-making

and representation. As an illustration, the concept of 'rice' has numerous interpretations on its types according to Asian society or 'snow' types according to Inuit people because those communities have their own shared linguistic codes and representation system to the object of rice and snow that other communities might not possess. Consequently, individuals will merely perceive the codes, concepts or signs in representing objects based on their social group convention (Hall, 1997a). Consequently, every communities possess their unique cultural difference that creates boundary with other social groups.

Identity and Difference Linkages

The notion of cultural difference that distinguising certain social group to others leads to the emergence of identity concept. Identity divided into two perspectives, including essentialist and non-essentialist views (Woodward, 1997). The essentialist views identity as a fixed and unchanging material, "which do not alter across time". On the contrary, non-essentialist views identity as a social construction that is unfixed and fluid, which able to be reconstructed across conditions and situations on ad infinitum. For instance, the author as the person who born in Indonesia will never shift their identity as an Indonesian-born person based on the essentialist view. However, the non-essentialist view believes that the author's identity will possibly change over time if the author lives, works or gets married in the other countries than Indonesia.

In addition, Woodward (1997) states that identity can also be identitifed by two system, symbolic marking through representation and social marking through inclusion or exclusion of certain social groups. The concept of those two systems have been formerly brought by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as cited in Bright (2020). For instance, in symbolic marking, wearing black cloth and pant with a *Blangkon*, a traditional Javanese headgear worn by men, symbolizes the identity of *Samin* or *Sedulur Sikep*

groups in North-Central Java, Indonesia. On the other hand, in social marking, the identity of *Samin* groups can be maintained by excluding or including that *Samin* group to other Javanese social groups based on its symbolic marking. For instance. *Samin* groups are considered as one of the Javanese communities in Central-North area because they are historically settled in the area for a long time ago. However, *Samin* groups will be marked by their all-black dress with a *Blangkon* which completely excluded with other common social groups in Central Java.

Culture shapes identity by giving others a favorable meaning of subjective form. Subjectivity, consciously and unconsciously, embraces who we are in our personal emotions and thoughts, and cultural contexts that make up our sense of belonging (Woodward, 1997). It builds the concept of self-identification that allows us to recognize whether we are in the "existing" or "becoming" stage of the concept of identity (Bright, 2020). Beside social marking of inclusion and exclusion, self-identification concept has also become an essential part in determining identity difference. It applies to differentiate all characteristics of specific identity or concept into at least two opposing groups such as us/them, self/other, sameness/otherness.

Difference concept distinguishes identity by marking the boundary as identity known as 'insider' against another defined as 'outsider' which creates distinctions with other social groups (Kramsch, 2014). In line, Hall (2011) argues that identity can be determined by political interests known as identity politics. In this classification, political power designs a particular perspective to recognize the identity of others by labeling and stereotyping any other group or community. For instance, the labelling of 'black' people around the world that leads to the discrimination over the race, such as aphartheid system in Africa. This political power that is potentially splitted the identity difference into insider and outsider groups become one of the classification systems through agency.

Therefore, identity is defined by the process of identifying others who have either similarities or differences within the classification system through culture, subjectivity, and agency (Hall, 1997c). Difference is constructed by referring to those who are defined as the outsider or in terms of 'other' (Hall, 2013). It creates binary oppositions that can be viewed from negative or positive side depending on the social group's perspectives. Hall (1997a) convinces that there is always a power that operates between the two terms of binary oppositions which discriminating either the outsider or insider disproportionally. Hence, this study analyzes the concept of language and culture that are enormously connected with identity and difference in understanding their roles toward language learning process.

Method

The research method of this study was autoethnography research. It was selected in terms of examining the critical reflection of the author's personal experience by becoming reflective practitioners (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This method is a form of personal narrative exploring the author's life experiences (Liu, 2020). Autoethnography research will be also used to construct the author's reflective inquiry, respect personal experience, and emphasize knowledge of social construction (Stanley, 2019). Thus, the author analyzed his personal experience as a reflective inquiry towards the concept of language culture and identity difference.

In this study, self-experience exploration combined with social context explanation are presented to reveal understandings of how language and culture culture have formed the identity difference of language learners. The author firstly gleaned data from his personal writing, photograph, performance programs, certificates, and information collected by talking to colleagues to remember the experience that pertains to his ethnical identity as a language user and teacher (Stanley, 2019). Secondly, the author had already discussed the personal experience with his critical friends and

colleagues during the study group session. Subsequently, the author constructed the interpretation and meaning-making from his critical experience by using the concept of representation system from Hall (2013), language culture from Kramsch (1998), and identity difference from Woodward (1997). The findings of this study provided self-reflection that reveal valuable insights about what shaped my language attitude and my teaching practice.

Findings

In analyzing the notions of language, culture, identity, and differences from the author's personal experience, the author primarily explains and considers his social and cultural background. Following the explanation, two vignettes of the author's life story are presented to depict the real-life experience. The author then analyzes the detailed personal experience using some of the underpinning concepts and theories proposed by the experts in language culture and identity difference in order to find out the relationship of those concept with the process of language learning.

The author was born and raised within Javanese culture in Central Java, Indonesia. In addition, the author is a member of the Islamic community, Indonesia's largest religious group. This story is based on the author's personal experience six years ago. By this time, the author had experience with several American and European volunteers teaching English at an Islamic boarding school in Salatiga and teaching Indonesian. They were mostly teenagers who have done their secondary level schools and prepared or pursued for their undergraduate study. Most of them joined the program as their very first experience visiting Asian country such as Indonesia. It could be a cultural shock and challenging time since the weather, food, and people were surprisingly different from what they used to encounter in their everyday life.

There are two vignettes that used to gaining data from the author personal experience related to the interactions with those volunteers, which have different culture and background. First vignette explains the different culture that appeared during the interaction with Javanese local people that bounds the identity of Western and Eastern people. Then, second vignette explores the story of language being used by Western people that might be considered inappropriate and impolite for Javanese. The reasons of choosing those vignettes deal with the aim of this study in which the author wants to explore his personal experience that shapes the understandings of his identity and difference and reveals the nexus between language culture and identity difference.

Vignettes

Encountering Western Culture Experience

Following the Javanese hospitality, the Western volunteers as the guests were invited by the chief of Islamic Boarding School which called as Kyai in his home. The term 'Kyai' refers to a scholar or guru on the Malay Peninsula and Brunei (Federspiel, n.d.). In this story, he has the highest social position in the boarding regarding the culture stratification. At the beginning, all of the volunteers were welcomed at the entrance gate by the students and guided them to come in Kyai's home. I was quite surprising when I saw them not taking off their shoes. Suddenly, I told them to put it off outside of the house. One of them asked, "Why should I take off my shoes while entering the house? Is it illegal anyway?" I realized that they are not accustomed with that rule of taking of the shoes while entering the house. As a Muslim, I will not wear my used shoes inside my house since it will potentially bring impurities which are considered as a prohibition to do praying in Islam if it contains any impurities in the place or the stuff that we use for praying. In addition, Javanese will perceive that habit as impolite action since they will

not allow any dirty things entering the clean places if the house does not require any slipper to get into.

Afterwards, Kyai was approaching us when we were in his living room. I stood up first to shake his hand by kissing it as a form of honor and respect to Kyai. Then, all voulunteers shoke his hand as usual without kissing it. Someone asked, "Hi bro, why should you kiss his hand while you shook his hand?" he said. "Is it an obligatory rule here?" "No, not really, for some Javanese Muslims, including me, you have to do that to show respect for Kyai as a leader in our religion." Most of them were confusing in understanding the Javanese Muslim culture when they looked at my actions. In Javanese culture, showing some special gesture and action towards elder people is common, especially to those who have higher position in social stratification level according to the community convention. This culture might be perceived awkwardly by Western people since they could think that it is part of feodalism practice.

When we have sat in the sofa, an American girl said, "*Hi Abdul* (Kyai's name), *apa kabar kamu?* [how are you?]" trying to practice her Indonesian by greeting Kyai. The foreign volunteers learned Indonesian since the first time they arrived in Indonesian because the program also included language and culture exchange. Then, I had just shocked by what she said to Kyai because I was not accustomed to hearing such kind of habits in my society. I thought it was so rude and funny at the same time calling Kyai's name directly without any titles that are used before surnames or full names as a sign of respect. In contrast, the girl supposed that she was fine saying the right thing since she did not acquire any communicative competence in Javanese. In Javanese culture, we have three different levels of language stratification that can be used depending on the person that we are talking with, including *ngoko, ngoko alus, krama madya*, and *krama alus*.

Differences of Language Term in Javanese Culture

When I was in the program with foreign volunteers, my campus held a lunch inviting the Boarding Chief, students, and all volunteers in the campus hall. One of the staff said, "*monggo dipun dhahar Tumpeng meniko, isinya ada kering tempe, telur dadar, telur rebus, gudangan, ikan gereh dll*" [let us eat the Tumpeng which consist of stir-fried soybean cake, omelette, steamed egg, Javanese salad with grated coconut, fried salted fish, and others]. *Tumpeng* is a cone-shaped yellow rice dish form traditional Javanese cuisine served with varied condiments that almost appears in all of Javanese tradition. In the lunch session, the committee provided several different types of *Tumpeng* that made the foreign volunteers amazed with the foods because every single *Tumpeng* served in the table has different condiments, purposes and philosophical values.

After getting the plate, a female volunteer asked, '*Hi, apakah kamu biasanya makan masakan ini ketika merayakan sesuatu?*' [Hi, do you usually eat this cuisine when celebrating something?]. I said, "Yes we are, we only make this cuisine when we have a special event as a festive dish. This is so special when we talk about Javanese food. "What about that whole chicken? We used to grill the whole turkey for our Thanksgiving celebration back in my hometown," she said. She actually pointed out the whole chicken that Javanese called as *Ingkung* (a whole complete rooster cooked with Javanese curry). *Ingkung* also refers to any kind of roosters that cooked in a whole complete piece, including its feet and head. Both of cuisines was very important in Javanese culture since they were only used in special event and strongly related to any traditional ceremony in Java.

All foreign volunteers were definetely unfamiliar with the food terms used in Javanese language. The uncommon terms perceived by foreigners because of different prior knowledge and background. They never experience such traditional ceremony like in Javanese culture, although they also have other festive dishes served in celebrations. The identity of

being Western also put them into the 'outsider' side when they involve in the Javanese culture as the 'insider'. The difference of opposite culture and identity forms different terms in language since they produce different mental representation and symbol or sign to make meaning based on the social convention.

Discussion

The interactions in the vignettes between the authors and all parties can be analysed within the notion of language, culture, identity, and difference. In the first vignette, I should have respect and honor to Kyai by kissing his hand because of the social stratification level in Javanese social values. This attitude is socially considered as a polite behavior and constructed as an identity of Javanese beliefs which essentially marks the author as a Javanese Muslim within the Eastern culture (Wilce, 2000). Furthermore, identity can be marked into two different system, symbolic and social system. The honoring behavior that I practised is recognized as a symbolic marking of representation system from Javanese politeness culture. The symbolic mark is maintained through excluding the identity from the 'insider' into 'outsider'. In this case, I was understanding the situation why foreigners perceived that my polite behaviour of kissing Kyai's hand is an odd and illogical action. Their way of thinking is completely depicted the perspectives of 'outsider' or excluded social group of Javanese. Thus, they will not be able to accpet the values that Javanese believes in the behavior regarding politeness stratification.

Moreover, the Western volunteers' behaviors of still wearing their shoes while entering the house and calling Kyai without any honorific salutation can be highlighted as the classificatory systems or binary opposition for distinguishing identity difference. It constructs two coupled terms in identity difference which are 'insider-outsider' and 'inclusion-exclusion' perspective. In my personal experience, difference was negatively

interpreted since I was stereotyping that the Western people are very impolite due to their behavior that contrasts with Javanese values. The story of a volunteer wore his shoes inside the clean house and called Kyai's name without salutation was considered as impolite behaviors rearding Javanese beliefs. As a Javanese, I would consider how the way I speak to other people in my community since we have rules based on the language level stratification, how I behave appropriately based on Javanese conduct of etiquette, and how I respect people who have higher positions than me (Wilce, 2000). Moreoever, labeling people as Asians or Westerners is undoubtedly associated with a binary opposition of race, language, and color, which tends to be dicriminately politicized in some cases.

Regarding the insider perception on Javanese culture through identity recognition, Western volunteers as the outsider also automatically showed their identity as Indonesian learners who want to mingle with other local people. The use of target language was considered as the way how they represent their identity status as outsiders. It proved that identity can be shaped by the sense of subjectivity. During teaching classes with Western volunteers in Indonesia, I had a difficult time defining my self-identity from a subjective point of view. Therefore, I interacted with and contacted these volunteers, but retained Javanese values because I felt that they belonged to their own culture. As a result, these volunteers can classify myself as an Asian who support the oddly attitudes according to their perspectives. These classification systems are considered as a marking system of identity through culture, subjectivity, and agencies, which leads to the notion of difference.

The second vignette explains the interesting interactions between the author, campus staff, and volunteers. In that story, the campus staff offered Javanese traditional cuisine called *Tumpeng* and *Ingkung* to the volunteers. They definetely did not understand with the terms uttered by the staff even though they might know some parts or ingredients of the cuisine. The basic

understanding of several parts shows that the Western volunteers could have shared conceptual map with the campus staff by looking the food condiments at the first sight. They probably have a commonsense knowledge of the food representation by referring to the iconic and indexical signs of soybean cake, omelette, salted fish, steamed egg, Javanese vegetarian salad, whole steamed chicken, etc. However, they do not acquire the symbolic signs for the words *kering tempe, telur dadar, telur rebus, gudangan, gereh, ingkung* and other condiments name because they did not share the code of language as the representation of the cuisine and condiments.

Then, the case of not having shared conceptual map and the language code or signs can be interpreted through the following example based on the second vignette. In the second vignette, the volunteers did not possess shared language with the staff since they were very confused when the staff asked them to grab the foods. In contrast, I could understand what the staff utterance means easily since we are in the same speech and discourse community which have the shared linguistic code for those terms. It is not the representation concepts or elements that give meaning, but the context and the way the community expresses these things in its language code. These codes were used to regulate translations between concepts and languages (Kramsch, 1998). Here, I and the campus staff are a Javanese which shared the language codes and mental representation for referreing soybean cake, omelette, salted fish, steamed egg, Javanese vegetarian salad, whole steamed chicken, and any other condeiments as *Tumpeng*, and addressing the whole yellow curry chicken as *Ingkung*. Thus, those two terms are recognized as Javanese signs that agreed by the Javanese ethnic as the result of social convention.

Based on the terms *Tumpeng* and *Ingkung*, which embody the synchronous view of Javanese culture, Kramsch (1998) argues that culture is always created by human intervention in nature. In this story, *Tumpeng* is

made from a cone-shaped yellow rice and some other dishes that circling the cone as condiments. This interpretation of the dish, of course, had no other meaning before the Javanese intervened in its meaning socially and historically. The natural concept of the dish has changed over time. *Tumpeng* is always served as a festive meal in almost all Javanese ceremonies and celebrations, especially in the Javanese *Keraton* (kingdom) tradition. As a result, Java has numerous types of *Tumpeng* used in religious events and purpose-based social practices. This social practice has created a common tradition and story between them. Therefore, both the historical and social aspects of *Tumpeng* are used, among other things, as an expression of Javanese culture and identity that differs from others.

Therefore, I had the feeling that I belonged to Javanese beliefs, values and attitudes regarding the shared linguistic code and cultural interpretation of *Tumpeng*. From my personal experience, I should be very respectful when kissing Kyai's hand, as he has a higher position in Javanese social values. This polite attitude is socially constructed as the identity of Javanese beliefs and essentially identified me as a Javanese living within Eastern culture. According to Woodward (1997), identity can be characterized by both symbolic and social systems. Consequently, kissing Kyai's hand is considered as a symbolic sign of Javanese etiquette. This symbolic identity is maintained by social system through exclusion of other social groups. In this case, I understood why these Western volunteers felt that the habit of kissing other people's hand was so strange because they were identified as Javanese outsiders or excluded groups. Thus, they will not be able to recognize the value of what the Javanese believes in terms of politeness stratification.

Implications and Limitation

The analysis of this study has an implication towards the study of language culture and identity differences in the context of Javanese values and

culture. It can be shown that understanding certain cultures will bring greater implementation of language learning for people with different background identities (Campbell, 2015). As a result, language learners will significantly develop their language acquisition through the process of meaning-making and representation of culture, identity, and difference. Therefore, the implication of this study is to suggest that the experience of living in the target language country will help the language learner acquire a better understanding of the target language.

However, there are still some limitations that appear in this study. The author's personal experience analysis focuses merely on the Javanese context in which the possibilities of the representation concept in language learning process were not revealed yet. Also, the different contexts other than Java might elicit different possibility of understanding language culture and identity difference since the author only refer to the past personal experience teaching in one of the Islamic boarding in Central Java, Indonesia. The role of intercultural learning can be different not only in the outer circle of the place, but also in other settings of the inner circle. Therefore, further research on the impact of identity transformation and intercultural learning on language learning in context or in different contexts can be done to explore and find other possibilities.

Conclusion

In summary, the reflection and analysis of my personal experience reveals an understanding of meaning-making and representation system towards the notion of language, culture, identity, and difference. The vignettes discussion provides a complete portrayed situation in which language user and language learners communicate within the boundary of different language, culture, and identity. This interaction can be explored into several points, including the connection of language and culture that differentiate individual's identity from other people in forming difference. Regarding the

discussion of this study, I can comprehensively understand the definition of "who I am", situate myself based on "where I am", and dawn on the reasons of "why I am". Therefore, understanding the essential of self-identification determines how we recognize ourselves and others in relation to the appropriateness of language use within varied cultural values and the classificatory system in the concept of difference.

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