

Negotiating bicultural identities in Greece: the case of students originating from Albania

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Abstract: Bicultural conditions raise crucial questions and problems concerning identity formation. In Greece, where monocultural education and mentality are dominant, the goal of a balanced bicultural identity seems difficult to achieve. In order to examine the way bicultural identities are negotiated, the paper focuses on students with an immigrant background, specifically, on four Greek university students originating from Albania. Based on qualitative data the paper gives emphasis on the sociocultural and the familial factors effecting biculturality. The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the struggle for self-determination under bicultural conditions¹.

Key-words: Language Biographies, Bicultural Identity, Acculturation, Language Shift, Albanians

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I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present study is to lighten and analyze the process of negotiating a bicultural identity, as it emerges from the discourse of Greek university students originating from Albania. This research study is based on qualitative data which form part of a wider research plan aiming at analyzing Language Biographies.

Language biographies concern the history and life of the languages spoken by a person during his/her lifetime. Therefore, the main areas of focus are the periods, the places, the motivations, and the conditions of language learning, language use and language progress, as well as the socio-historical context of the language-learning process (Thamin & Simon, 2011). The analysis of narratives focused on language-learning, and also on choice, offers us (amongst other things) access to the complexity of identity-construction in situations of language contact (Duff & Bell, 2002; Pavlenko 2002; Stergiou, 2015; Stratilak, 2010).

Although the contemporary research on language contact is expanded in a multitude of phenomena, language contact can be generally seen as the mutual influence of linguistic systems and the relevant changes which occur while speakers of different languages interact (Hickey, 2013).

Within this context, linguistic practices are intrinsically related to the identity formation process. Thus, *Identity* as a key concept refers to a process in constant formation and is seen as multiple, ever-changing, and as a site of struggle (Norton & Toohey, 2011), but also as a narrative constructed through ambivalence, desire and a splitting between the representation of the *self* and of the *other* (Hall, 1997).

As regards *Bicultural Identity* and the wider concept of biculturalism, which is originally derived from acculturation theory, it refers to the capacity of intermixing heritage and receiving divergent cultural streams with regard to cultural practices, values and identifications (Schwartz & Unger 2010, p. 27).

Following Berry's *Acculturation model*, a Bicultural Identity (Integrated) may belong to one of four identity types which arise from culture contact, depending on the answer given by immigrants to two main questions concerning a) their cultural maintenance and b) their social contacts. In other words, the four strategies resulting from yes or no answers to these questions determine the type of identity which will be developed by immigrants (Berry 2001-2008). Thus, the created identities are the following:

- an *integrated (or bicultural) identity*, which implies an identification both with the ethnic identity and the host society's culture,

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- a *separated identity*, which involves a strong ethnic identification without identification with the new culture,
- an *assimilated identity*, which derives from identification with the host culture and the abandonment of the ethnic identity,
- a *marginalized identity*, which arises from the lack of identification either with the ethnic identity or with the host culture.

Biculturalism, which can be seen as the most adaptive way to deal with acculturation, does not develop in isolation but rather relies upon cultural and contextual factors which direct young people towards certain cultural alternatives and far from others. These factors are changing over time and varying across local and national settings. Furthermore they may work differently depending on the immigrant group and the host society in question (Schwartz & Unger, 2010; Phinney et al., 2001).

Two key factors on which the emergence of biculturalism depends are the sociocultural and the familial contexts. Firstly, biculturalism is facilitated by specific environmental conditions, such as the social validation of both the heritage and the receiving cultures (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). Secondly, it depends on parents' efforts to socialize their children into the heritage culture (Schwartz & Unger, 2010).

By presenting parts of 4 students' discourse concerning their language biographies, we will try to elucidate some essential aspects of these two factors, which determine the students' acculturative strategies and the development of their identity formation through constant negotiations.

Finally, as regards the (host) language issue, the concept of *Investment* in majority language learning is highly valuable (Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey 2011; Norton, 2017). The construct of investment, which has been developed in the field of Second Language Acquisition, "signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton 2010, p. 353).

As learners' investment in the target language is shaped by their wish to enrich their cultural capital, the more their capital increases, the more they reassess their sense of themselves and their desires for the future (Norton & Toohey 2011, p. 420). Language learners are conceived as having a complex and changing identity which is reproduced within social interaction. Thus, *investment* allows us to connect in a meaningful way the learner's desire and commitment to learn a language with his/her changing identity.

II. METHODOLOGY

In the context outlined above, oral data on language biographies were collected through semi-directive interviews with young people with an immigrant background. For the purposes of the present paper, the case of 4 female Greek university students originating from Albania will be presented. As regards narrative analysis, a "middle position" is adopted between traditional *realist* and *social constructivist* approaches. This methodological choice rests on the conviction that people [in fact] perform particular social and interactional tasks in the interview-situation, yet their stories also have some significance and "reality" for them, as they represent a manifestation of their psychological and social worlds (Croosley, 2000).

In the course of this paper, the socio-cultural context within which the above narrative is placed will be examined following the main principles of narrative inquiry. Furthermore, biographical data of the interviewee will be provided in chronological order, and parts of the analytical abstraction layer will be presented; the latter highlights the relationships between language choices and personal experiences of the narrator and the successive identity questioning and self-determination (Tsiolis, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Socio-cultural Context

As regards the socio-cultural context within which the students' narration is placed, it is important to summarize some crucial points: since the end of the 1980s, political changes in Eastern Europe in relation to the international financial situation have initiated the transformation of Greece to a host country for an increasing number of immigrants.

According to statistical information, the large majority of immigrant residents in Greece - before (56%) as well as during (52,7%) the financial crisis- are of Albanian nationality (IMEPO, 2004; Papastergiou & Takou, 2013). A similar situation is observed in relation to the distribution of students of Albanian origin in Greek schools, where minority/migratory languages have no rightful place. The numerical superiority of Albanian immigrants, and the ensuing high visibility of this ethnic group have led to its severe stigmatisation by the media and its discrimination by a large part of the Greek society.

The dominant negative representations of Albanians depicting them as criminals, thieves and gangsters, as well as individuals who are deprived, marginalised and threatening to the Greek society, are well-known in Greece and have generated multiple stereotypes and prejudices (Figgou et. al., 2011; Labrinidis & Lyberaki, 2001; Pavlou, 2001; Stergiou, 2007).

In this context, students of Albanian origin have been largely confronted with direct or indirect discrimination. International research findings have shown that discrimination has a strong negative impact on both psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry & Sabatier, 2010), and constitutes a considerable obstacle to the development of integrated bicultural identities.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical Data

The four female students who participated in the research are between 21 and 23 years old, and they study at two different departments of the University of Ioannina (Department of Preschool Education and Department of Philosophy, Pedagogy, AND Psychology). They arrived in Greece at the age of 2, 5 / 4 / 6 and 8 years old. Given that they were children who socialized in the host country before the age of 12, they can be considered mostly as “second generation” (Portes & Zou, 1993, p. 75). Their parents, both Albanian, are hard-working, and are absent from home for most part of the day. Apart from one participant, who attended the first year of primary school in Albania, the other three learned the Albanian language from their parents at a low spoken level.

In all four cases, the use of the Albanian language is limited even within the household, and has, for the most part, been replaced by Greek. All of them assert that they are not especially competent in their native language, but express a strong desire to continue developing it. Language is seen as the core element of their ethnic identity, and their incompetence at it makes them feel ashamed. However, it is important to note that the need to assert their ethnic identity through language maintenance has been developing since their late adolescence, after a long period of socialization based mostly on assimilative strategies.

Sociocultural Factors effecting Biculturality

School is the institution where language is learnt from an academic perspective, and also the main social environment where newcomers encode and decode the host society's demands. Good school adjustment is a crucial aspect of sociocultural adaptation (Berry, 2005).

The fact that Greek schools have always functioned in a monocultural and monolingual way along with the wider social discrimination against the ethnic group of Albanians has contributed significantly to the considerable limitation of Albanian language learning and use by second generation children. The importance attributed by immigrants to school adjustment as a way to attain social mobility and integration can lead even to blind generalizations on the part of authority figures, as we can see in the following case, in which the student is describing how after being encouraged by her teachers to speak Greek in the classroom (but evidently also on account of an overall climate), she also stopped speaking Albanian altogether:

«Our teachers kept telling us ‘this is a Greek school, you have to speak Greek – at home you can speak whatever you like or in the schoolyard, but inside the class, you have to speak Greek’. I’ve always complied with it and never spoke Albanian to anyone. I didn’t speak to anyone, I wanted to, but I didn’t, and they still made fun of me. They’d say to me ‘who do you think you are?’ and all those who made fun of me, they all speak Greek and they don’t speak Albanian». (Elsa)²

What is expressed in the last lines reflects the phenomenon of language shift of second generation Albanian immigrants to the Greek language, which is empirically proven by different research findings (Gogonas, 2010; Gogonas & Michail, 2014; Griva & Stamou, 2014). Being intrinsically connected with the issue of identity formation, language shift results from the Albanians’ desire for social integration into an environment where their ethnic identity is not only discouraged, but is also depreciated. Being ‘a little Albanian’ in a Greek school may raise important obstacles to balancing a bicultural identity and gaining self-esteem, as we can see in the two extracts below:

«In particular, at third year at primary school we had gone to church and as some kids were waiting to take communion, some other kids from Albania also lined up. And a teacher jumped up and said: ‘Look at the little Albanians going for communion before our kids’... And it was like...when you’re a little kid and you listen to stuff like that, you think that it’s not good, that it’s your problem, sort of thing, that, I don’t know, you have a virus and it’s bad for the others, something like that». (Nefeli)

«There was a kid, Greek, but he must have also been Gypsy that kid, and they made fun of him by calling him the little Albanian. So you see, he was Greek and they made fun of him by calling him the little Albanian, because they thought he was worth less. This. I think for them, anyone who was worth less, I mean, wherever he was from, they would call him the little Albanian». (Laura)

In this context, the ‘investment’ in the host language and culture reflects the effort for self dissociation from a stigmatized identity and for the desire to acquire a wider range of symbolic resources, such as language,

² The participants have been called to choose their own pseudonyms for the research.

education and friendships, but also of material resources, such as capital goods, money (or professional perspectives) (Norton, 2010). The narrators' investment in the Greek language becomes apparent in their excellent school performance, which allows them to respond to the disparagement they experience by switching from a low to a higher status.

In the following extract, we can see the process through which one of them decided to claim an equal footing with her Greek classmates:

«...whenever I raised my hand and said something, that look of the student next to me, sort of like 'how do you know that, you Albanian?' would make me go mad. So, then I started to study and I thought to myself: so, is this what it's all about? Perfect. I'll do it». (Liria)

In the case of students who managed to enter Greek university, the desire for social mobility, recognition and equity seems to have been realized, at least at a symbolic level, as we can see in the following extract (reported by the same student who also reported the previous incident with the teacher at church):

«...I saw him, because I had to get some certificates from school and I went up to him and said hello, as I would... And I say to him 'Don't you remember me, Sir?'. And he says 'Were you here?' I was about to say 'I was also there at church' but anyway... And he says 'Ah, where are you -he says- did you enter university?' I say 'Yes, at Yiannena. I'm at fourth year- I'm graduating', whereas his son is still working on it. He didn't enter university, even though he did the national exams three times. Cool, and I think 'divine retribution'((laugh)) ». (Nefeli)

Besides the personal struggle for self determination and social adaptation, educational progress and success also represent recognition for the family's efforts towards this goal as well as moral restitution of the ethnic heritage.

«Good, I've entered university, there aren't many Albanians at university, I've achieved something ... I've studied really hard for it and I consider it an honour, you know, I visit my grandma and say to her 'I'm at university, grandma', 'ah, that's my girl' she tells... all her relatives ...» (Laura)

«...And perhaps I wanted it as a reward for my parents, as it were, and for all the things they've done for me and as a personal goal, so to speak, to achieve something good.» (Nefeli)

Along with the school environment, which affects the identity formation of second generation children, the family's attitude towards the process of acculturation also plays an important role. As mentioned earlier, the family's attitude towards ethnic identity and culture is one of the main factors which favour or hamper the emergence of a bicultural identity. In the following section we will examine the ways in which the four participants' families have influenced the process of their identity determination.

Familial Factors effecting Biculturality

According to previous research, a great number of Albanian parents in Greece seek to improve their living conditions and to ensure the best possible education for their children as a way of securing better future work opportunities (Gogonas, 2009; Michail, 2010). The dominance of the Greek language at the expense of Albanian, and the gradual language shift to Greek, may be seen as a consequence of multiple factors: a) the parents' desire for their children's social mobility in Greece, b) ethnic language stigmatization, but also c) the 'fluid' expression of ethnic identity which characterizes Albanian parents (Gogonas, 2009; Gogonas, 2010, p. 91). Anyway, it is important to mention that the dominant school-language attitudes and practices have been found to play an important role in shaping the language views and practices of immigrant parents (Gkaintartzi Chatzidaki & Tsokolidou, 2014).

In relation to our data, all four students admit and also describe in their interviews the language shift to Greek, which was "permitted" by the family in order to facilitate the children's integration and school adjustment. However, once the acquisition of Greek on the one hand, and school success on the other, are considered to have been completed, it is the fathers of the families who turn to the learning of their mother tongue:

« ((the family's role)) wasn't, I guess, so, as to learn Albanian well, but they didn't do it on purpose. They did it to make it easier for me. I mean, they let me speak Greek more, because in this way I felt more comfortable. Yes, and now my dad says to me 'No, you'll try to learn this word. You'll try to speak Albanian'. Now, he is in a hurry that I learn». (Liria)

This change of attitude towards the ethnic language may reflect a belated parental awareness of the occurred language shift and also some concern for an eventual detachment of their children from their ethnic identity. In any case, this belated 'probingualism' behaviour which may also reflect some kind of *language reclamation* (Hornberger & De Korne, 2016) is not particularly welcome by the children who grew up with a rather assimilative parental attitude.

«And then he would say to me 'speak Albanian, don't speak Greek'. Ok. I don't know why. Why he changed it, basically why he changed it so abruptly, and didn't say so from the beginning. I would have preferred it if he had said so from the beginning. » (Laura)

Aside from parental influence on the topic of language, the participants also remember their parents' prompting them to a passive attitude towards discrimination in order to avoid coming into conflict with their environment. Meanwhile, the children felt unarmed against the received devaluation, but also unable to valorize their ethnic and personal identity.

«In the past, I don't know why, but whenever they said something in class, my parents said 'Elsa, please, here you are in Greece, we don't want any trouble, we've come here to work, we haven't come here to do anything else, so whatever they say, you won't say anything, you'll just listen'. And so whatever they said, I just listened». (Elsa)

«Whenever the kids at primary school said to me 'You're an Albanian', I bowed my head and left or I had an argument with them. I never said 'Yes, I'm an Albanian, what do you want?' I should have admitted it since then. But nobody ever said to me 'Accept yourself as you are so you can carry on'». (Laura)

In cases such as the previous one, although the family did not provide the necessary support and strengthening of ethnic pride, which might have worked for the children as a means to face social devaluation, the parents invested financially and symbolically in education, which was considered by them as a necessary condition for economic, professional and social status change.

As regards the factors which influenced the students' school performance, and their entry to the university, their families have been found to have played the most important role providing the necessary *aspiration capital* (Oropeza, Varghese & Kanno, 2010).

«...The parents. Let's say by getting their messages across willy-nilly. I mean, that we are working hard so that you can have private lessons, for example. We've come to a foreign country; we're doing this for you, so that you can do something better tomorrow, so that you are not in the same state as us. » (Nefeli)

Towards a Bicultural Identity

If we tried to sketch the acculturative process of the four students in Greece, we would say that they spent their school years until adolescence, mostly by activating assimilative strategies dictated both by their families, and their school environment: They spoke only Greek, their peers were mostly Greeks and they felt more Greek than Albanian.

This situation corresponds to the "unexamined attitudes of childhood" which has been considered as the first stage of ethnic identity formation (Phinney, 1989). According to this conceptualization, the second stage is a moratorium or a period of exploration, which leads to a secure, achieved, ethnic identity at the end of adolescence (Phinney, 1989).

In the cases studied here, the second stage is clearly reflected in the students' discourse: They seek and claim their Albanianism through language and ethnic self-identification, thus primarily as Albanians, and not as Greeks any more.

«((Albanian))... since it is my mother tongue, I have to learn it, as it were. Maybe when I was younger I wanted to speak better Greek, but then, when you discover who you are, yourself and all this, you want to make this thing better, so to speak. » (Nefeli)

« (...) I've always thought of myself as Greek in Greece (...) but as I'm growing up, I understand that I'm only an Albanian living in Greece. » (Laura)

However, we cannot yet clearly detect the achievement of a secure ethnic identity which is essential for social integration as a bicultural person. The students' struggle for self-determination in their very late adolescence highlights conflicts, such as that reported in the following extract:

«I don't want to become Alb ((lapsus)), eh, Greek. It's good to be Albanian. » and some minutes later:

«I read interviews of children from other countries who say "Greece is my country, I feel Greek, I haven't found another home like this, I haven't learned another language like Greek" and I'm impressed because it's so easy for them to say so. But then, I'm compelled to say something similar. » (Liria)

This identity negotiation also highlights insecurity at a personal level and, consequently, at a professional level as a future educator:

«We have to know what to tell the children when they come on their own and ask "What am I, Mrs? Am I Albanian? Am I Greek? What am I?" What will we say? "I don't know what you are, either" ((laugh)). That's why I need to find myself, to see what I am, to be able to tell tomorrow's children. "Those children, what are they?" » (Laura).

Apart from the negative effects resulting from the particular conditions discussed above, the experience of biculturality and multilingual identities can be precious for the development of intercultural competence of (future) educators (Canagarajah, 2017). Given the increase in the number of students who have a minority background and have been educated in Greece, and are also studying in pedagogy departments, the employment of bilingual teachers -especially Albanian speaking ones- would assist in limiting the identity, (as well as language), disparagement to which various ethnic groups are subjected, through the development of intercultural competence for all students.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we discussed the contextual factors that determine the identity formation process among young people with an immigrant background. Through the discourse of four Greek university students originating from Albania we outlined their efforts to negotiate their bicultural identities.

In the case of the numerically most important immigrant group of Albanians which has been also highly discriminated, a language shift to Greek is observed among its young members.

The social, institutional and educational context in Greece put several obstacles in achieving conditions of recognition and valorization of their particular otherness. We should note that the law regulating the issues of citizenship for second generation immigrants just passed in July 2015, following severe reactions and objections.

As for intercultural education, it is still at an early stage, since an ethnocentric and assimilatory orientation continues to characterize school practices and applied educational policies, which, in their own turn, influence families' acculturative strategies.

Nevertheless, biculturality and multiculturalism are inherent in contemporary societies; children should not, therefore, be left helpless and alone to deal with identity issues. Immigrant families, school education and immigrant policies have a crucial role to play in the development of a multicultural ethos, and need to move away from neutrality and theory towards more efficient and profitable practices. Accepting and developing multiple identities with respect to individual choices should replace the essentialist approach of national identities.

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