

'The philosopher Vincent Descombes has aptly shown that the notion of identity is paradoxical, because while we attribute identity to individuals, identity itself looks for belonging. But I will add: one speaks of one's own identity, or what sets one in relation with others, either to affirm what we have in common or, conversely, to distinguish oneself, or even to withdraw from the common. The one does not go without the other'.¹

—Étienne Balibar

Upon considering Descombes' assertion, the biblical story of the Tower of Babel was brought to my mind.² The story tells of peoples speaking one same language travelling to the *land of Shinar* where they intend to build a tower 'whose top may reach unto heaven'. This is seen as blasphemy and so God quickly puts an end to this by 'confound[ing]' their language and 'scattering' them all over the world so that they can no longer understand each other. I believe that this symbolically illustrates internal conflicts between universal language and individual languages. The story presents this through its depiction of the collective being divided into the individual. After considering this thought, I decided that I would explore the involvement of language with identity and I will be examining this throughout my discussion.

It has been suggested that 'identity is so elusive, slippery and amorphous that it will never prove to be a useful variable for the social sciences.'³ Renowned psychologists, including Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson, have delved into the construct of the identity and all have obtained varying definitions and considerations of the term. Furthermore, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has noted, 'there are so many 'categories' and 'groups' to which an individual may be attached in one way or another - so many 'identities''.⁴ He describes himself as 'an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry [...] an economist, a dabbler in philosophy', and his list is far from exhaustive. Thus, we have already been introduced the complexity of this term and how it can be so different.

On initial analysis of the term identity, many definitions can be ascribed to it. In etymological terms, the term began as the Latin word '*idem*' which was formed to provide a translation equivalent for the ancient Greek ταὐτότης.⁵ Both mean 'the same' linking to the concept of unity. This continued to become '*identitatem*' in medieval Latin ('sameness'), '*identité*' in French and eventually 'identity' in English.⁶ On a linguistic level, one may note that a concept expressed in Greek did not originally have an equivalent in Latin. This is significant in emphasising the idea that different languages imply different modes of thought which is shown through the lexis available to the speakers. Moreover, the term has remained the same in meaning even though it evolved across different languages. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty's terminology, 'translation' is a generic name for universality.⁷ Therefore, there is an implication that the changing identity through different languages is, as Descombes puts it, identity 'look[ing] for belonging'. The identity wishes to belong to the individual and the less abstract way this is achieved is through language.

So far, identity has been shown to be both similar and different in relation to its expression through an individual. In his paper, Fearon presents numerous definitions of the word 'identity' and states that the 'common underlying concept' is that 'almost every one evokes a sense of recognition'.⁸ The 'every' should be noted as it implies a sense of the universal. As Descombes

¹ Birnbaum, 2017

² Encyclopedia Britannica

³ Abdelal, et al., 2009

⁴ Sen, 2007

⁵ Oxford Dictionaries | English, 2018

⁶ Online Etymology Dictionary

⁷ O'Neill, 2007

⁸ Fearon, 1999

puts it, a sense of 'belonging' is prevalent when considering the identity. In brief, there is a myriad of identities with which one can identify and the use of the term can vary depending on how you define it. Thus, we are led to the overarching question: what is the identity universally expressed through?

As stated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, to take an entirely philosophical approach towards the identity is complicated as philosophy alone cannot 'explain' anything or, it may only 'describe' what is anyway the case.⁹ Therefore, I believe that identity should be approached from a more established concept rather than through abstract or existential 'lofty questions', as Guy Deutscher writes.¹⁰ Fearon explains that identity 'has strong roots in the Ordinary Language' and according to this linguistic philosophy, then the word identity can be used in many different contexts to express different ideas.¹¹ Dr Milena Komarova describes some of the different contexts in which identities may alter, from time or space, to the type of activity in which one is involved.¹² Yet what always remains present is the form in which this description occurs, and it is through the use of language. John McWhorter states that the English language is 'the language of the internet[...]the language of finance[...]the language of air traffic control, of popular music, diplomacy' in a TED talk on 'reasons to learn a new language'.¹³ This is particularly significant in emphasising how language is so ubiquitous in its expression in our lives. Language is the aspect that '*reflects* the character of its speakers' and perhaps even '*influences* the thought processes of its speakers', according to Deutscher.¹⁴ All humans speak a language and I am of the opinion that language is closely intertwined with one's own 'paradoxical' identity.

Noam Chomsky has argued that all languages share the same universal grammar, the same underlying concepts and the same degree of complexity.¹⁵ His hypotheses state that language is unique to humans and in a narrow sense then it is specific in the same way to all.¹⁶ Developing this further, universal moral grammar is a concept that was first described by Marc Hauser in saying that 'our moral faculty is equipped with a universal moral grammar, a toolkit for building specific moral systems.' and that 'Once we have acquired our culture's specific moral norms... we judge whether actions are permissible, obligatory, or forbidden, without conscious reasoning and without explicit access to the underlying principles.'¹⁷ Rigorous ontological analysis has been conducted into this subject, particularly in regarding ethical choices. The TOM model (Theory of Mind) is a form of artificial intelligence through which 'mathematical rigour' can be provided to the study of human ethics.¹⁸ Studies have involved creating models such as the ones developed by Newell, Simon and Miller for causation. More specifically, in proposing that Agents cause an Event which then causes a State. Although this may at first seem unrelated to language, the study is concluded in saying that said systems must start with at least one principal 'unproven ethical axiom' that is a statement of what the individual values essentially.¹⁹ Thus a conflict of the universal is raised here where Chomsky's universal grammar affecting everyone's mental process is juxtaposed with the idea that ethics and thought derive from one sole individual's mind.

⁹ Wittgenstein, 1958

¹⁰ Deutscher, 2010

¹¹ Parker-Ryan

¹² Futurelearn.com

¹³ TED

¹⁴ Deutscher, 2010

¹⁵ Deutscher, 2010

¹⁶ Cook, 1985

¹⁷ Hauser, 2006

¹⁸ DeBellis, 2018

¹⁹ DeBellis, 2018

It is important at this stage not to neglect the influence of Étienne Balibar himself on the notion of the 'universal'. He defines it himself as 'the possibility of being equal without necessarily being the same, and thus of being citizens without having to be culturally identical'.²⁰ This introduces conflicts and paradoxes as already mentioned but also creates an 'exclusionary discourse'.¹² For example, national identity values such as French *laïcité* [state secularism] have been misconstrued and used to discriminate and exclude minority groups in the recent banning of the burkini. This demonstrates a conflict in the freedom of expression and of French cultural values.

This conflict with different cultures and languages is embodied in the ever-important example of immigration. Norway's immigration minister, Sylvi Listhaug, has stated that people applying for residency there must respect 'Norwegian values'.²¹ Many European countries have this attitude, but Norway has reinforced it by making it mandatory for immigrants to pass a language test so that they can best 'integrate' themselves. The American Tom Tancredo, known for his extreme views on immigration, describes 'a lack of desire to assimilate' as a 'dangerous thing' and this is an opinion that is prevalent in many countries.²² If immigrants must therefore learn a new language, they tend to do so keenly but not without the interference of their own mother tongue. This view referred to regarding language barriers is one that challenges the idea of unity in identity. Siding with Descombes' line of thought, in the context of immigration, languages are what one uses to 'distinguish oneself' in the sense that a variety of differing languages become present in the host country.

However, this is not always the case. The development of creoles is an interesting representation of the overcoming of a conflict between languages. Creoles and pidgins are traditionally linguistically classed as a 'deviant of a standard language, usually European'.²³ The term creole (from the Portuguese *criulo*) was applied originally to white men of European descent born and raised in a tropical country and was later extended to include indigenous natives and enslaved peoples. It mostly refers to languages spoken in and around the Caribbean and West Africa and creoles developed colonially and imperialistically through the forced interaction of European and indigenous languages. Pidgins are composed of the vocabulary from the colonial language and the grammar of the native language which then expands into a Creole. Haitian creole, for example, owes a large majority of its grammar to African languages instead of using 'nettlesome features' such as the French *y* and *en* adverbial pronouns.²⁴

The formation of these new languages illustrates how strongly identities are expressed through language in that speakers who may have spoken different languages originally 'look[ed] for belonging' in one common language for all and who fashioned a mixture of both colonial and native identities through language. Sam Selvon's book, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) is narrated in creolized English and is regarded as the first novel to represent the Black migrant experience in England.²⁵ This is effectively achieved through humour but also through a realistic portrayal of racial and class boundaries in London. To refer back to Balibar's *Universal*, there are 'internal conflicts' and 'violence is a constant possibility' as foreign languages do not always tessellate with the national identity, creating racial conflict. Balibar also states that 'every universalism is rooted'²⁶ and I think that this fundamentally applies to one's own identity. The development of creoles achieved universal communication between different people thus 'setting one in relation with others' as Descombes asserts.

²⁰ Birnbaum, 2017

²¹ Nelson, 2017

²² Gans, et al., 2012

²³ Decamp, 1971

²⁴ McWorther, 2015

²⁵ Selcon, 2006

²⁶ O'Neill, 2007

An expression of individual identity can be found in the feeling of Basque identity in opposition to the Spanish identity.²⁷ The identity is individual in relation to the other languages in the world but simultaneously a national identity as a collective region in Spain. This is also true of the Catalan identity. The political repression during Franco's era meant that the Basque language was prohibited and the Basque country (*Euskadi*) experienced a rise in the sense of national pride which channelled itself into radical nationalism in order to establish a stronger identity. Basque (known as *Euskera*) became a principal means of identification but also of an 'us' versus 'them' stance in the Spanish country.²⁸ This is also true of Catalonia where Catalan has equal status with Castilian and most of the population of Barcelona are fluent in both languages.²⁹ Remaining independent of Spain whilst acknowledging Castilian is, in itself, the notion of a 'paradoxical' identity.

The linguistics elements of the languages themselves are perhaps the most important to consider; Basque used to be practically unwritten and myths and legends have been preserved by voice mostly.³⁰ There are words in Basque which do not have a direct translation in other languages too, similarly to the Greek and Latin identity mentioned earlier, suggesting that language perhaps is not so universal. Returning to Balibar, he also reflects on translation and its being a form of conflict in the universal. Untranslatability creates an obstacle to compatible identities which suggests that each language has its own innate concepts that cannot conform to those of other languages. The Basque word *erdera* means 'any language other than Basque' which reflects extent to which the Basque people esteem their own language and identity above that of others.³¹ In the context of the Kuuk Thaayorre people, an Aboriginal community in Australia, cardinal directions are used instead of the directions for left and right. For example, one might say that they are wearing a shoe on their south west foot.³² It has been proven that the Kuuk Thaayorre people have a better sense of direction which can be attributed to how very engrained it is in their language. This ultimately reflects that the intertwining of language and identity is difficult to eradicate.

There have been attempts to unify all of humanity through languages. The Polish doctor Ludwig Leyzer Zamenhof was the creator, under the pseudonym of *Doktoro Esperanto*, of the Esperanto language.³³ The language drew upon Slavic, Romance and Germanic languages and Zamenhof hoped to reach a universal understanding that would bring about peace and prosperity on a global scale. Its speaking population today ranges from 50,000 to 2 million yet the language did not become as widely spread as was hoped. The reason for this is that Esperanto is too artificial, it is not tied to a strong enough identity. Although it would have unified countries in economic and political terms, it is too superficial in its objective of unity. If it were to be learnt, it would be a second language through which speakers would be less able to express themselves with fluency and clarity, as is the case with learning other tongues. This lack of a presence of identity in the language is partly what led to its failure in addition to its replacement by the English language which has been spread by globalisation. Strong debates surround this issue and whether it will be detrimental to linguistic variety around the world. Studies this range from those that uncritically endorse global English to those which see it as reflecting a post-imperial but essentially capitalist agenda.³⁴ On the other hand, Salikoko Mufwene argues that 'English is not a killer language' and that languages are only 'expand[ing]

²⁷ Bartolomé Peral, 2013

²⁸ Bartolomé Peral, 2013

²⁹ BBC News

³⁰ Wentworth et al., 2010

³¹ The Local

³² Boroditsky, 2017

³³ Polonyi, 2012

³⁴ Phillipson, 2001

and fragment[ing]'.³⁵ This is supported by the formation of creoles and by dialects including *Spanglish* in the US and *Kiezdeutsch*, a German dialect spoken by children of Arabic or Turkish-speaking immigrants in order to simplify Standard German.³⁶

To dwell on my final point, I believe that the failure of a sole universal language is the ultimate portrayal of the 'paradoxical' notion of identity. Language and identity are not interchangeable terms, but they do go hand in hand and, as explored, identity has a contextual meaning and yet it can always be approached from a linguistic perspective in its analysis. Unity can only manifest itself across different languages existing in harmony with each other where differences are celebrated for their diversity and language is a fundamental way in which identity expresses itself. This expression ties it to national, ethnic and cultural identity also. Finally, language is also an ever-evolving concept and no matter the language, it is a means through which one can relate to and distinguish oneself from others. After all, language and communication is the one aspect common to all of humanity.

³⁵ Coupland, 2010

³⁶ McWorther, 2015

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