

Bilingualism, identity and social tolerance

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of bilingualism on identity and social tolerance among students of Tabriz University, accordingly the level of social tolerance is investigated among the students with different ethnic backgrounds. Every year many students from different ethnic backgrounds that have different maternal language from country's official language attend the University of Tabriz. This survey research was constructed among the male and female students in various areas in the 2011-2012 academic years. The sample size is 370, which were selected by multi-stage cluster sampling. Results show that bilingual students have flexible attitude towards groups, beliefs and acts, also those who are fluent in more than one language act better than monolingual people in social tolerance, coping skills and group identity. In other word, there is significant relation between coping skills, identity with bilingualism.

Keywords: Bilingualism, language, group identity, social tolerance, coping skills

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1. Introduction

Language is the key to open the lock of human mind and as thoughts' exchange medium; it is an important criteria to obtain beliefs and identity beside the other effective factors. Generally, people who are speaking the same language are closer to each other. However, the lack of a common language does not necessarily lead to the loss of common identity; a common language can't create individually a common identity among people.

Identity is a set of individual and social characteristics and the thoughts that persons obtain through interactions with their notions and includes two dimensions of individual and social identity. Individual identity indicates characteristics that make a person unique and different from other people in society.

In Individual identity, "I" stands versus "others" and its differences become obvious. Social identity of an individual is those characteristics that a person gains through the membership of social groups and social rituals such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender and political parties. Obtaining individual identity creates "I" versus "others" while obtaining the social identity builds/creates "us" versus "them".

Regarding creation and development of interactions between human beings, who have different thoughts, opinions and identities, a subject is considered as tolerance. The tolerance implicitly is the beginning of discourse, freedom of opinion, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. In other words, tolerance is allowing people to have individual characteristics and conserving beliefs and behaviors that others consider them wrong or Repugnant. Social tolerance needs to recognize different others and their identities.

In societies with high cultural diversity like Iran, different ethnic groups live together in the same geopolitical frame. In these societies, it is extremely important to create a sense of belonging and attachment of ethnics to their national identity besides achieving national unity in the society. Weakness of tolerance and lack of respect to others will strengthen tendency to leave the group, lead to conflict and ethnic separation.

In the current era, the globalization process besides moving towards isomorphism has strengthened types of group identity. Thus national identity of societies, which was based on institution of government – nation, is the losing its unique status while two different identities forms. On one hand, by consolidation of global interest of human society, supranational and global identities become important, on the other hand, regional and ethnic identities are manifested more than before which can be called "local world". If this process is not properly managed, it can threaten multi-ethics societies (Khazaii, 2008: 52). This research looks for answer of this question that: Is there a relation between language, identity and social tolerance?

2. Theoretical Foundations

According to Casteles, identity is the source of meaning and experiment for people, while talking about social actors, the term identity is a process of making a meaning based on cultural features or a collection of interconnected cultural features that proceed to other semantic sources (Casteles, 2002).

According to Mead, Identity or "self" has two categories of subjective "I" and objective "me" and its genesis approaches show that identity has a social nature (Ritzer, 1995). Based on objective dimension, identity is formed under the influence of others. Due to socialization processes, self takes a reflective and dynamic character, affected by its background or social position (Tanhayi, 1998). Bloomer developed this idea that social self is created by the influence of cultural norms, status and social expectations (Tavassoli, 2001). Final result of this process is formation of hybrid identity, this means that experiments and social actions are changed and developed under the influence of values, structures, rules and social controls and identity is formed and changed in social processes and broad range structures (Ritzer, 1995).

Language is one of the most important factors of obtaining identity. Nersians in his researches has emphasized on language as the most significant factor creating identity, and even argued that it is indicator of ethnic identity (Nersesians, 1996).

Maternal language with which a person begins talking and growing up and acquires identity, includes social and cultural elements gained from social context that a person belongs to. This language has the most important role in creating personal connections and relations and is used for thinking and imagining. s since by this language, primary concepts are formed in her or his mind while country's official language, that is taught after reaching school age, has different words and grammar from maternal language and at this stage, bilingualism is proposed with its special problems (Fanaii, 2005).

Communication between people from different contexts requires matching the concepts of them. Definitely a bilingual person certainly has better linguistic creativity and adaptability as he has a broader vocabulary and concepts. In addition, since the bilingual person merges two cultures in his or her identity, this fact provides dual ethnic and cultural belonging sense and recognizes multiculturalism as a social value (Fakoohi, 2002).

In modern societies, acceptance of multiculturalism as a social value is considered in an issue called tolerance. In the tolerance space, criticism and verbal communication can be changed and spirit of cooperation, collective actions, solidarity, social responsibility and discourse between individuals and groups is provided. Tolerance makes trust, and leads to individual and social security and significant relations in society (Miri, 1998).

Some people define tolerance as "no prejudice" (Martin, 1964). The others believe that tolerance means endurance and sustainability (Sadajandron, 1999). Some others think it is a social virtue which makes peaceful coexistence of individuals and groups with different views and different lifestyles in unit community, possible (Galeotti, 2002; Dennis, 2007).

The results studies of Cote and Erickson (2009), Dixon and Rozenbaum (2004), Sigelman and etal (1996) about tolerance indicate that the level of communication is one of the effective factors that influence tolerance. They also emphasized on that persons and groups with more variety of social networks have more tolerance. Education is another factor that has high correlation with tolerance (Cote & Erickson, 2009) (Bobo & Licari, 1989). They argued that people with high education have more developed and diverse network and they are more active in voluntary associations, which can increase their tolerance (Cote & Erickson, 2009).

In Iran, results of research by Askari and Sharepour (2001) regarding tolerance and its related factors among students, show that M.S. students have more tolerance compared to the under graduate students, according to this result, degree of education is one of the most important factors related to tolerance.

Yoosefi (2001) in the research about relation between ethnic and national identity shows that commitment to national identity has a relation to ethnic identity, but they are in contrast together. This means that, activation of national commitment decreases ethnic identity.

Rezaii and Ahmadlou (2006) in research on Azeri and Kurdish youth show that transnational and national identities are consistent with each other. Fakoohi (2002) in his study about contrast or harmony among the various levels of local, national and global identity among the Lor's ethnics by studying the lifestyles indexes, argued that local and national identity are highly compatible.

3. Findings

The frequency distribution of the research findings about social identity and social tolerance based on its dimensions among students (Table 1) show that about 60% of respondents have relatively low or slight group identity and 40% have high group identity. 74/4% of respondents have a relatively high level of ethnic identity and in contrast, the ethnic identity of 22/2 percent of respondents is relatively low. More than 60 percent of the students had little political

tolerance, 58/2 percent of them have relatively low ethical tolerance, and only 33/8 percent have a high level of ethical tolerance. Also, 56/65 percent of the students have a lot or relatively high of religious tolerance and 54/8 percent have a low or relatively low ethnic tolerance.

Table 1. Frequency distribution dimensions of social identity and social toleration for the respondents

	Social tolerance				Social identity			
	political	moral	Religious	Ethnic	Ethnic	individual	national	Group
Low	2.9	19.9	10.4	4.5	0.3	4.5	9.3	1.1
Relatively low	59.1	38.3	24.4	50.3	22.2	42.3	36.9	58.5
Relatively high	33	25	49.5	40.1	74.4	50.8	43.9	39.9
High	5.1	8.8	7.15	5.1	2.1	2.4	9.8	0.5

Three ethnics of Kurds, Turks, and Persians in this study have most frequency. Accordingly, individuals are assigned to the monolinguals and bilinguals. So, people whose native language is Kurdish or Turkish (other than Persian), have been studied as bilingual individuals.

Comparison of three people of Kurdish, Turkish and Persian language shows that while Kurdish speakers have high ethnic identity and Persian speakers have high individual and group identity, Turkish speaking individuals have high average in national identity. Moreover, Turkish-speaking and Kurdish-speaking individuals, compared with Persians have high moral and religious tolerance.

In other words, bilingual individuals are being high moral and religious tolerance toward monolingual people.

Analysis of the results related the dimensions of social tolerance indicate that bilingual people have high religious and moral tolerance compared to monolingual people.

Table 2. Results of social identity and social tolerance dimensions means on the type of language

Language	Social tolerance				Social identity			
	ethnic	religious	moral	political	group	National	individual	Ethnic
Turkish	3.75	4.12	3.38	3.52	3.77	4.01	3.87	4.41
Kurdish	3.90	3.98	3.11	3.72	3.75	3.74	3.98	4.46
Persian	3.83	3.73	3.01	3.70	4.07	4	4.26	2.26
Total	3.79	4.06	3.32	3.59	3.80	3.99	3.92	4.40

Results of correlation test between dimensions of identity and tolerance in Table 3 shows that moral and religious tolerance has a direct and relatively strong relationship with each other. In the dimensions of identity and tolerance, there is a direct relationship between group identity and moral and religious tolerance. This means that the higher levels of group identity leads to increase in the level of moral and religious tolerance.

Table 3. Results of Pearson correlation test between dimensions of social identity and social tolerance

Variables	Coefficient of correlation	significance level
Group identity and moral tolerance	0.226	0.000
religious tolerance and moral tolerance	0.545	0.000
Group identity and religious tolerance	0.219	0.000

The results of Pearson correlation test, between the dimensions of social tolerance and social identity in Table 4 suggest that the relationships between two variables is medium and this relationship is significant at the one percent level, and based on this, it can be concluded that students of Tabriz University comprise medium level of social identity and social tolerance.

Table 4. Pearson correlation between identity and social tolerance

Variables	Coefficient of correlation	significance Level
Social identity and social tolerance	0.239	0.000

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study examines the relationship between social identity, social tolerance and bilingualism among students of the University of Tabriz. According to the results, from the dimensions of social identity that have been studied in this research, group identity among students has the highest average.

Also, group identity has a direct and positive correlation with moral and religious tolerance. This means that enhancing group identity leads to increase in religious and moral tolerance. The results show that in the studied sample, bilingual people have higher moral and religious tolerance compared to other respondents. Accordingly, in response to the main research questions, it can be said that there is relationship between language, identity and social tolerance, and bilingualism can affect the rising of social tolerance in society. Based on the fundamental assumptions of symbolic interaction theory, regarding the possibility of the formation of the "self" variety, in every society, cultural collective identities can be derived from various sources and the type of these source is defined based on historical conditions, geographical environment, socialization processes, discourses of power, social relationships, media, cultural policy and etc. Secondly, because identity sources are numerous, monolithic or one-dimensional identity is not formed, but the identity of the actors may be organized under the influence of each specific identity.

Finally, as this process occurs gradually, actors are consistent with the multiple sources of their identity. Thus, the collective identity of the individuals in Iranian Society includes many resources that among the most important of which, is local or ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity has been strengthened due to having cultural and linguistic commonalities within ethnicity, interactions and emotional relationships within the group, the emergence of mass movements in predominantly tribal areas, growth in the local media, globalization, development of sense of self-consciousness, influence of powers on the ethnic elites and bringing up specific ethnic demands.

But the most important point is that because of historical and long-term proximity of each of the ethnicities together on the one hand, and emphasis on national identity (in spite of all these sources of strength) on the other hand, there is no conflict between the identity resources in Iranian society. Even it can be said that the more people get group identity, they use more understanding in social interactions. In this case, we can bear witness to the rise of social tolerance, individuals away from dogmatic practices and the exclusion of violence. High social tolerance acts as a mechanism to self-controlling in the individuals and increases order and social cohesion in the society.

Thus, as Galeotti (2002) and Dennis (2007) notice, social tolerance can lead to peaceful coexistence of individuals and groups with different views and different lifestyles in a united society.

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