Identity and near-native second language proficiency: What happens to the identity of the exceptional language learner?

Stefanie Siebenhütter

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of identity and its relationship to language proficiency. In particular, the question of an influence on an individual's identity through near-native L2 proficiency will be investigated. This includes the factor of age of language acquisition and the "Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)" also referred to as "sensitive period" or "age effects" in recent years. Furthermore, the development of deep emotional bonds to an L2 and the L2 community is discussed, leading to the concept of identity and its use in applied linguistics. The paper concludes that defining the concept of identity based solely on language is not fruitful. Rather, it leads to further terminological confusion, as does equating identity with social roles. This suggests for a concept of identity that is defined independently of the languages an individual is able to understand and speak, bearing in mind, that languages may influence an individual's self-concept as much as social roles and the living environment.

1. The native and the near-native speaker

Only recently the book *Lessons from Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency. Motivation, Cognition and Identity* by Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos was published, addressing the issue of near-native proficiency in exceptional L2 language learners. The book serves as an excellent basis for the discussion, as the authors not only provide an excellent overview of the current state of the debate on the concept of the "native speaker" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 30-33), and then refreshingly approach the topic of "nativeness and nativelikeness" not with language tests for once, but in the form of 30 qualitative biographical interviews to get the view of the speakers themselves. In this book, the authors deal with a topic that has received less attention so far, the "near-native L2 proficiency" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 4) of exceptional L2 speakers. The authors deliberately narrow down this group of speakers with selection criteria according to which the study participants were chosen. The criteria briefly presented in the introduction (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: xiv) are described in detail in chapters two and three. Crucial for the authors was the criterion that a speaker could be perceived by others as an L1 speaker, at least for a limited time: "could be taken for a native speaker of the language by 'real' native speakers in a casual conversation for at least five minutes" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: xiv). Thus, they look at "nativelike proficiency" from a different angle than has been common in research on outstanding foreign language learners. Instead of defining syntactic or lexical test criteria for assessing a native-like proficiency, the authors rely on the judgment of 'real' native speakers (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: xiv). Consequently, the methodology is based on the biographies of the study participants rather than on structural language proficiency tests.

The authors' focus is primarily on what aspects of exceptional learners can be transferred to improve the chances of success for ordinary learners (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 20). After a brief introduction to the theoretical background and some previous studies dealing with gifted L2 learners, the authors describe "nativeness" or "nativelikeness" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 39-42) as it is often understood in applied linguistics and how they defined it for the study presented in the book.

The attainment of nativelike proficiency can hardly be discussed without the factor of age of language acquisition and the "Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)" also referred to as "sensitive period" or "age effects" in recent work, since it is rather a gradual decline that varies across the different components of communicative competence on L2, why it is more appropriate to talk about more general age effects (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 11). The age factor and possible resulting limitations in language acquisition are fundamentally relevant to research on adult L2 learners aged 18 or older at the time of language acquisition who reached native-like proficiency (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 11). As for the critical/sensitive phases – now considered to be more than one or a smooth decline in ability (Biedroń 2023: 21) – there is still disagreement on issues such as when the critical phase begins and ends, how long it lasts, and whether learning ability continues to decline or bottoms out, which remain to be clarified (Biedroń 2023, Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 20). The short introduction to the subject nevertheless provides the reader with a good overview and a stimulus to delve deeper. For now, it can be stated, that it is already known, that "the 'younger = better' premise" is not acceptable anymore per se (Singleton & Ryan 2004: 223).

> "A number of researchers (Andriga and Dąbrowska 2019; Birdsong and Vanhove 2016; Pfenninger and Singleton 2019) question the existence of the CP and claim that the language ability decline can be explained by a number of other factors, for example, the quality and quantity of input, motivational dynamics and contextual factors." (Biedroń 2023: 26)

An excellent and only recently published summary should be mentioned, as it presents a detailed overview on previous research on the concept of critical/sensitive phases in second language acquisition (Biedroń 2023). Biedroń (2023) also includes in her review the state of research on especially gifted learners, polyglots and savants, who do not seem to be subject to the universal constraints of critical phases (Biedroń 2023: 19, 23-24, 28), so this source is recommended for a more in-depth exploration of the topic.

Although Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023) included younger speakers, who reached nativelikeness in their chosen L2 at the age of 16 the research concentrates mainly on adult learners: The interviewees either learned the L2 primarily in the classroom or were not exposed to it in a naturalistic environment until after age 18 (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 11). Though, the authors aimed to include a sample as diverse in experience as possible by selecting participants, ages 16-67, with a total of 16 different L1s who mastered nine target languages at a nativelike level, the final subject group of 30 speakers in total, which consisted mainly of European, female participants who were either English L1s or nativelike in English (a necessity since the study was conducted in English), is addressed by the authors themselves as limiting (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 22). This however, makes an ideal opportunity for future research that includes a broader sample or includes qualitative data from speakers with other L1s and L2s, other regions, e.g., Asian or African L1s, and more male speakers.

Choosing the narrative biographical interview as a methodology is particularly gratifying since the viewpoint of the speakers themselves has been wrongly neglected in applied linguistics L2 proficiency research to date. It may not be possible for most learners to achieve nativelikeness in an L2, but also "ordinary learners" can still benefit from the learning biographies presented in Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos (2023).

When it comes to the characteristics of these special L2 learners, emphasis is placed on how they achieved such a high level of L2 competence, what conditions had to be met for this to happen, and what common features are found among all these speakers, regardless of whether the L2 in which they reached nativeness was German, French or English. Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos (2023: 43-52) explore possible influences of the L2 learners' family and other early childhood experiences that may have been crucial to their later ability to achieve nativelike. The main finding from this chapter is that the provision or presence of an environment with rich L2 input allowed learners to develop a deep personal interest in foreign languages and can accelerate L2 learning speed. However, and the authors make this very clear, this was not automatically the case. It was always the personal interest and also the will to master a language that was considered crucial.

2. Emotional bonds to language as a reason for outstanding L2 acquisition

Another topic that has been little addressed in the research literature so far, is the formation of a deep bond to the chosen L2 and to the L2 community that goes far beyond the mere motivation to master a foreign language very well (Siebenhütter 2020, in press). It is a "unique bond with the chosen language" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 55), something that attracts the speaker's attention, to put all this effort into becoming a near-native speaker in the chosen L2. This may be "rewarding contact with the L2 community" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 55-58) or "attraction toward the L2 culture and cultural products" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 58-60), such as extensive reading in the L2 or a particular fondness for music in the L2. Some learners fell in love with the language itself, such as the sound of the language or the structure of the grammar, or they found a deep connection to the writing system (e.g., the Kanji in Japanese). The authors emphasize that the unique bonds their participants formed with an L2 are more than just an attitude or predisposition. Learners' L2 motivations intertwine with participants' positive emotional experiences, forming a unique bond and strengthening their relationship with the L2 (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos

2023: 64). These findings are perfectly consistent with previous qualitative research findings that showed how emotional attachments are formed to both the L2 language itself, and to the L2 speaker community in late bilinguals, and that meaningful experiences a speaker had in the L2 were more important than age of acquisition (Siebenhütter 2020, in press).

Discussing outstanding L2 proficiency, cognitive aptitude, linguistic aptitude and other learning-specific factors such as personality and motivational factors, etc., which may be specific and different from other language learners need to be explored. A whole range of motivational conditions are noted that can have a beneficial effect (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 89-90). Nevertheless, there is good news for the 'ordinary L2 learner' (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 90): Although exceptionally high cognitive aptitude or certain personality factors certainly help in advanced language learning, no factor seemed to be indispensable; rather, learners' affective and motivational relationships with their languages seemed to have a much stronger connection with their success (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 90).

3. The characteristics of exceptional L2 learners

Personal factors that are still rarely discussed in applied linguistics in connection with L2 acquisition are good mimicry ability (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 71-73) and musicality (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 73-74). In addition, a high degree of self-control, perseverance, and mental strength or robustness can be observed in the study participants (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 138). As an important motivational factor, the "desire to integrate" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 81) and the desire not to stand out (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 82) were strong motivational factors. These learners did not simply have high levels of language ability. Rather, their actual learning abilities were found to be different in that from the time they fully 'decided' to use their chosen L2, they were able to reach their full potential to become an excellent L2 speaker, even though they may have struggled with other languages previously (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 86). It turned out that personal motivation, a number of cognitive and personality and contextual factors, and the conscious decision to master that specific L2 form a dynamic combination required to become a near-native speaker in the chosen L2 (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 87).

The exceptional language learners seem to be not only highly motivated to master their chosen L2, but also put a great deal of effort into their learning. One characteristic notably to a high degree in the nativelike L2 speakers is attention to pronunciation and intonation (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023). One speaker even describes this as the most important thing in his learning activities: "That's basically all I care about: pronunciation. That's all I focus on." (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 91). It is explained how well the L2 learners featured in this book have grasped what it takes to be considered a very good or near-native speaker:

> "I do think a lot of passing for a native in all kinds of languages involves, first of all, speaking in an idiomatic way. And second of all, getting the pronunciation roughly correct. And then they won't notice any grammatical mistakes you might be making." (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 91)

Since pronunciation still does not receive the attention, it deserves in L2 lessons, one can only agree with the authors' conclusion that more effort should be put into authentic pronunciation training, although not every ordinary learning objective is specifically becoming native (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 103). It is an all too often overlooked topic in L2 learning and teaching and the participants presented in this book show how much can be achieved with good pronunciation and also regular use of idioms.

It is state of the art, that study participants reaching nativelike L2 proficiency are exceptional language learners and doubted that every learner has the same opportunities to acquire a foreign language (e.g., Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023). Such outstanding language learners not only

show special attention to the nuances of their chosen L2, e.g., to develop a native-like accent, but generally put intense effort in developing own strategic learning methods (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 97-99). This is one of the main takeaways from the Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos (2023) confirming Moyer (2021: 153) who noted that gifted learners of a second language are not fluent out of nothing, but put hard work and strategic effort in reaching their goal to become a nativelike speaker of their chosen L2.

Another topic, the "reinforcing relationships and social expectations" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 115) discuss. L2 acquisition, after all, has an inherent goal of being able to build social relationships that can change drastically depending on the L2 skills a learner can offer in contact with native speakers. Significant others such as family members and friends, contacts at the workplace and the L2 community as a whole can become "driving forces" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 115) when learning a language. The authors show, how "intense emotional involvement in the L2" participants had towards both the language and a significant other (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 120-121) often go hand in hand with "long-term motivation" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 121) which is in line with Siebenhütter (2020, in press). In sum, social bonds and positive attitudes toward the L2 itself and the L2 community made a big difference in the study participants' pursuit of high language learning goals (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 125).

Another important factor is ongoing commitment, why the "sources of persistence" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 127) that gifted language learners use to maintain their positive emotionality and passion should be noted (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 136-138). In addition, the study participants used self-concordant visions of their future selves to achieve their goals and also exhibited high levels of self-control, exercised regularly, and successfully used strategies to overcome setbacks (e.g., on language tests).

If discussing the final stage of the exceptional L2 learners learning histories or in other words, what it meant for them to reach their destination (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 142). It is argued, that "no matter how excellent and 'nativelike' the proficiency" of the L2 learner is, "it will never match a (monolingual) native speaker's competence in every respect" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 151). Despite, it is argued, that gifted L2 learner are able to achieve "linguistic self-confidence", and develop a feeling of comfort in speaking the L2 ("a comfortable L2 voice") what gives them a 'sense of "ownership of the L2" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 148-151). Especially for the criterion "ownership" the authors see target-oriented, in-depth future research that will allow for better understanding of the aspect of the relationship of the L2 learner to his/her target language(s) (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 153).

4. Identity and Language proficiency: Are we groping in the dark?

A widely used term in relation to language use and acquisition is *identity*. Most publications dealing with the issue of identity in bilinguals and multilinguals are little developed and leave the reader somewhat confused at best. Attempting to describe the identity of multilinguals, often fails in finding clarity and thus work with a terminological variety, from "core personality", "personal core," and "self-conception" to the "multifaceted nature of language identity" and "cosmopolitan personas" (e.g., Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 156-159). On closer examination, however, this confusion of conceptualizations results from an equation of identity with language or with various roles that an individual must fill in daily life (Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). Although Simmel (1980) provided a very clear concept of 'social circles' (Soziale Kreise), these are regularly confused with "identity", which in extreme cases leads to an "L1 and L2 identity separation" and even to "identity erasure" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 159-162). Therefore "family-related and professional identities" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos (2023: 165-167) are misleading, as the family and professional roles an individual fills are not well described as identities. Family and work related commitments are

different roles and are usually filled individually only for a certain period of time it would not be helpful to equate them with identities: While social roles can have an effect on identity, they should not be fully equated with identity (Siebenhütter 2023). Instead of confusing identity with self-concept and social roles, it is suggested to speak of linguistic profile, which of course affects a speaker's self-concept whether one speaks an L1 or additional L2.

The concession "identity is unquestionably a complex and multifaceted subject" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 167) to conclude the topic is unsatisfying. The authors note that although their study participants spoke at length about identity-related issues, no consistent picture emerged from their collected accounts (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 167). This is hardly surprising, since "identity" as used by laypersons is rarely a well-defined concept which is even among linguists almost never the case. Therefore, asking study participants about their self-assessment is hardly suitable for reaching a better understanding of the concept of identity and the results are not comparable. Especially the described forms where language and identity are equated, for example "identity erasure" (e.g., Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 162) is questionable, because this would mean that the identity of a person would only be defined linguistically, which is certainly not the case (Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). Often, identity is equalized with language, e.g., Kuo (2009) who takes multilingual newspaper headlines in Taiwan as evidence that the inhabitants of Taiwan are described to have multiple identities. Though it might be the case, that discursive change reflects an upcoming "new Taiwan identity" (Kuo 2009), this will be not "multiple identities". However, definitions of identity based on language alone, lead to further terminological confusion without better describing the respective phenomena themselves, and are not helpful either.

In recent years, there has been a trend to use "multiple", "fluid", or "hybrid" to describe the concept of identity (Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). Although many people have developed a tendency not to be satisfied with only one identity, the phenomenon of multiple personalities, which used to be considered a psychopathological issue, is now widespread and treated as normal (Danzer 2017: 7). But the separation of L1 and L2 identity (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 159-162) in the sense of 'multiple identities' that a multilingual individual possesses is misleading (Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). The assumption of a 'multiple linguistic identity' is quite common in applied linguistics, but on closer examination it neither makes sense nor leads to more clarity than the statement 'multiple linguistic competence' (Siebenhütter 2022: 351-352). One cannot agree with the idea that an individual has multiple identities due to the fact that he or she is able to use two or more languages actively and passively. A more promising approach would be to look at the concept of identity in less detail, i.e., without interpreting every social role and every ability and competence of individuals as their own identity.

Equally misleading is the proposal of partial (linguistic) identities regularly used in linguistic publications (e.g., Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 159-162), since this notion suggests that the individual can be broken down into separate parts that have nothing to do with each other. This is along the lines of what psychology understands by "dissociative identity disorder (DIS)." A severe identity disorder is characterized by "almost no coherent self-image or sense of identity" (Dammann et al. 2011: 281; Siebenhütter 2022, 2023). However, bilinguals/multilinguals are not ending up with 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Pavlenko 2006: 3). There is evidence that adding L2 or even L3 and L4 does not lead to a split personality (cf. Pavlenko 2006: 3). When bilinguals speak of themselves as having "definitely two different ways of being me" (Pavlenko 2006: 24), speakers are most likely referring to their perception of themselves under certain conditions or in different (social) contexts) and not to their identity as a whole. Rather, multiple and split identities, as well as identity loss, will generally be unique to individuals who would also be diagnosed with a severe identity disorder. The approach to the concept of identity in psychology is possible via the detailed considerations of problematic developments, which - with all caution - may allow for reversals for

definitional issues in applied linguistics as well. Dammann et al. (2011: 281) name a number of distinguishing features between expressions of identity ranging from mature identity to identity confusion, crisis, conflict, diffusion, and identity fragmentation. A concept of identity understood in this way, as it is used in psychology, makes it clear that it cannot be assumed that all people have the same well-developed identity or an identity that is fully developed at one point in time. In the case of an excellent acquisition of an L2 in adulthood, to speak of "identity erasure" (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos 2023: 168) nevertheless seems inappropriate, since an identity defined in this way is based on several sources than just the language(s) an individual is proficient in. If, nevertheless, in connection with the move to the L2 living environment, a problem such as the one described above should arise, then this certainly cannot be blamed on the nativelike mastered L2 alone.

In sum, the concept of social circles proposed by Simmel (1890) and the classification of the individual into different role contexts, is instead helpful to reach a clearer picture in the question of identity (Siebenhütter 2022: 264). For linguistics, it would be purposeful to further analyze the experiences of individuals with their linguistic experiences and to sharpen the view for the respective qualities of social relations and emotional bonds that are made with these languages, i.e., for example, what exactly the L2 speakers feel comfortable with and identify with and what they feel repelled by and consequently try to distinguish themselves from. Clarity is further achieved when identity is defined as stable over time. Self-concept, on the other hand, refers to an individual's self-perceived involvement and feelings in a particular situation (as probably described by the study participants in Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos 2023 research). The social roles (younger sister, teacher, student) that an individual fills for a given period of time can affect the self-concept and even the identity of the same. The same applies to the language(s) an individual uses or finds himself exposed to, especially if an emotional attachment to one of these language(s) has been developed e.g., through significant experiences with the same (Siebenhütter 2020, 2022, in press).

5. Habits the 'ordinary' L2 learner can learn from the nativelike L2 learners

In sum, Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023) provide with their book further evidence that at least being perceived as nativelike is possible even for late second language learners when high motivation and a number of prerequisites (e.g., ability for mimicry, musicality, social connections within the L2 community) come together. With this publication, the authors provide a summary of characteristics that nativelike L2 speakers bring to the table and what supports they have taken advantage of to reach such a high level of fluency. As the title suggests, the authors do not assume that this opportunity is available to all L2 learners and that it is a very special combination of prerequisites, talents and personality traits that allow L2 learners to reach the point where they can be considered native speakers.

Finally, if there is only one point that both L2 learners and teachers can take from this book, it is the realization that pronunciation training can contribute a lot to being perceived as a competent speaker and that such exercises can be quite useful, even if a bit more so for musically gifted learners with well-developed imitation skills. Thus, the book not only sheds light on a group of L2 learners that has hardly been considered from this point of view so far, the especially gifted ones. At the same time, the authors provide a variety of practical suggestions for teaching and learning foreign languages on one's own.

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