

The multilingual profile and its impact on identity: Approaching the difference between *multilingualism* and *multilingual identity* or *linguistic identity*

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ABSTRACT

This paper visualizes why the identity of multilingual speakers cannot be described adequately with the term “multilingual identity”. Exemplarily, the multilingual profiles of multilingual speakers in Northeastern Thailand are explained showing that language may come without an identity signal. It appears that multilingualism is generally rather situational functional. Instead of equating identity with language, the research shows how the multilingual profile of individuals may influence their self-concept i.e., their identity. The paper also reviews other discipline’s identity concepts and their applicability to linguistic research aiming to fill the research gap concerning the theoretical modelling of *linguistic identity* and the lack of a standardized examination method for *linguistic identity*. The aim of this paper is to describe theoretical aspects of the modelling of *linguistic identity* and to provide a standardized methodology that can be used to capture what was identified as a *linguistic identity* on the example of the Kui minority.

1. Introduction

Referred to as “linguistic identity” or “linguistic identities” in linguistic works (e.g., Dressler, 2014; Hansen Edwards, 2020; Palviainen and Bergroth, 2018; Gayton and Fisher, 2022), the term “identity” is generally used without examining its usefulness for the linguistic context. It is true that the terms “identity” and “linguistic identity” (LI) are increasingly used in recent publications; however, a closer examination of the underlying definitions and a review of the fundamental fit of the combination “identity” and “language” is only found in rudimentary form (e.g., Dekeyser et al., 2019; Kresić, 2006). This paper seeks to fill this gap using the example of the Kui minority, who live in the border region of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The identity development of multilingual Kui - who speak Kui and one to three other languages as their first languages (L1) from early childhood on a daily basis - is approached from a socio-psychological perspective. In particular, the role of language in the process of identity construction is discussed. The study sheds light on the so-called LI of multilingual speakers to deduce the resulting developments in multilingual societies.

The author understands the concept of identity as a unique combination of specific aspects of the self: self-image, self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-esteem. This concept (inevitably a simplification)

may include elements such as “a person’s name, skin colour, lifestyle, values, the legal system” etc. (Haarmann, 1996: 219). For a multilingual individual, (spoken) languages can add to the self-image to an equal extent, or one language can have a higher self-identificatory value than others. Likewise, language may play a rather subordinate role in one’s identity construction. Instead of equating multilingual language use with a multiple (or hybrid or fluid) linguistic identity as often seen in the literature (e.g., Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos, 2023; Kuo, 2009; Laakso et al., 2016; Leimgruber et al., 2022) the developments arising in multilingual societies must be derived from the precise investigation of identity formation processes in multilingual individuals. As a rule, these are developments that can be observed based on the subjective perception of the individual (micro level) and their possible effects on the social macro level.

1.1. Objectives and research questions to approach the concept of linguistic identity

The research gap regarding the concept of LI raises two main research questions: (1) How can LI be defined and (2) How can LI be approached methodically? These questions are especially relevant in research on multilinguals. Although identity and multilingualism are

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certainly among the subject areas that have received increasing attention in the humanities in recent years, attempts to accurately represent identity - whether in words or visual form - reveal how abstract the concept is. Kresić (2006) pursues this question by asking what contribution linguistics and language theory can make to the processing of the complex relationship between language, speaking and identity, in addition to social-psychological concepts of identity if the concept of identity should form the starting point (Sdroulia, 2007). From a theoretical point of view, different disciplines have to be considered, which have already presented comprehensive works on the construction of identity and the concept of identity. The second research gap relates to methodology, since although there are already some approaches to capture *ethnic* or *national identity* (e.g., Phinney, 1992; Phinney and Ong, 2007), to the author's knowledge, there is no standardized examination method for LI. This paper aims to review the concept of "linguistic identity" (LI) in a fundamental way, considering besides linguistic viewpoints the knowledge and research of other disciplines by including the theoretical models and approaches of sociology, psychology, philosophy and social psychology, not least because the majority of the literature originates from these disciplines. The benefit may be a fruitful way to capture the abstract concept *identity* and especially the LI more precisely to contribute to the further development of typological linguistics that goes beyond a mere adoption of terminologies from other disciplines without reflecting on an actual fit which is done in linguistics so far. Reviewing identity concepts of related disciplines can deliver details to understand and measure identity formation by observing social interactions. Besides theoretical aspects of defining and analyzing LI, the author seeks to provide a standardized methodology to capture what was identified as a LI, i.e., an approach or a model based on empirical language data to provide a crisp and clear definition of LI with the associated research approach that can be used across languages and cultures.

By collecting and analyzing empirical sociolinguistic data from the Kui minority, who live in the political border region of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia on the Southeast Asian mainland (Fig. 1), the following research questions are answered: (1) How can Kui identity be analyzed, (2) Is Kui identity equal to Kui language or is multilingual language use leading to multilingual identity (which would be equal to the identification with multiple self-concepts due to speaking multiple languages), (3) Is language an important identification factor from the perspective of the speakers, from outsiders and in general in Thailand?

It can be shown, that multilingualism among the Kui is highly situation-specific i.e., in scientific topics, interregional communication, in the home and family environment, trade and contact in the regional environment. The language use is functional for certain situations. Thus,



Fig. 1. Kui living area in the border region of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

this paper contributes not only to research on multilingualism and minority languages but also to research on multilingual contact phenomena and questions of identity in typological linguistics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Multilingualism and identity

Whether an individual is bilingual depends on the definition one chooses to work with. In its narrowest meaning, there is Bloomfield's (1933: 56) definition of a "native-like control of two languages". By contrast, the concept of multilingualism as used in this paper refers to someone who regularly uses two or more languages in everyday life, and switches between languages depending on the situation, partner, and topic of the conversation (Weinreich, 1974: 73). As the majority of people in Southeast Asia grew up with at least two languages and many of them use more than four languages in their daily activities the term multilingualism is preferred before Bilingualism in this paper (compare in-depth-discussion on bi- and multilingualism in Berthele, 2021).

Multilingualism research with respect to identity was done in (applied) linguistics mainly for the discussion of the prerequisites for successful migration and related to language learning (e.g., Darwin and Norton, 2015, 2016; Forbes et al., 2021; Gayton and Fisher, 2022; Norton, 2013; Norton and Toohey, 2011; Siemund, 2023, mainly Ch. 5) or general didactic questions in settings with multilingual learners (e.g., offer subject classes in several languages or not) and research on language competencies and possible positive and negative consequences of multilingualism on cognition and language acquisition (Berthele, 2021). It is argued that multilingualism in societies is usage-based, which means that it is not a goal or necessity to achieve a "perfect competence" in Bloomfield's (1933) sense in the language that covers all areas of life.

As the linguistic origin, the term identity goes back to late Latin *identitas*, from Latin *idem* = the same. Duden (2022, Auth. Transl.) lists three meanings: 1. Authenticity of a person or thing; total agreement with what it is or what it is called, 2. Inner unity of the person experienced as "self", 3. Complete agreement with someone, something about something; equality. Synonyms for identity are besides others *authenticity, self, originality, individuality, self-awareness, congruence, correspondence, distinction, uniqueness, similarity, congruence, convergence, particularity and selfhood* (Collins dictionary, 2023; Duden, 2022). Accordingly, identity can be disguised, held tight, kept clean, preserved, donated, lost, and so on. One can a) ascertain, clarify, dispute, or confirm someone's identity, hide the identity behind a pseudonym, vouch for someone's identity b) find his identity or c) search for the identity of the arrested person, the chemical identity of caffeine and so on (Duden, 2022, Auth. Transl.).

Identity as a concept cannot be assigned to linguistics or the social sciences exclusively. Rather, it is of interest to a whole range of disciplines.¹ Originally a technical term in individual psychology, since the 1960s the concept of identity has experienced an expansion of its applications in a wide variety of scientific disciplines (Haarmann, 1996: 218). Synonyms that refer to specific aspects of identity, such as self-understanding, self-experience, self-evaluation, and sense of self (Haarmann, 1996: 2019), do not capture the entire anthropological infrastructure conducive to a full understanding of the big picture of identity. The described aspects deserve a critical examination, as identity, an originally purely logical concept, has taken on logically inconsistent, misleading and momentous meanings from social psychology (Mumm, 2018: 1). Not only the concept of identity, but also of ethnicity and their interrelationships need consideration:

¹ Originally a technical term in individual psychology, since the 1960s the concept of identity has experienced an expansion of its applications in a wide variety of scientific disciplines (Haarmann 1996: 218).

"Identity is originally a logical artificial word with a clear definition [...]. Identity refers to existing or posited entities and is, in its starting point, an entirely etic category which, as will be remembered, first experienced its emic reinterpretation in social psychology. Ethnicity, as it turns out, is structured similarly. At its core, ethnicity is an ethical entity. This is not to be found in the real, diverse forms of community building, but in the process, which can be observed everywhere, that groups differentiate themselves from one another from the point of view of the question of trust. This happens on a small as well as a large social scale. True ethnicity contains the idea of a society that functions as a community and reproduces itself. Therein lies the transition to the emic side of ethnicity." (Mumm, 2018: 81, Auth. Transl.)

Ethnicity, also called *ethnic identity*, and concepts such as *ethnicity* and *ethnicity consciousness* are mixed up just as fatally as *identity* and *identity consciousness* (Mumm, 2018: 82). This confusion of concepts leads to further ambiguity so that identity becomes a concept without any clear definition.

2.2. Identity in previous multilingualism research

2.2.1. Linguistic identity and the lack of definitions

Although the term "linguistic identity" (LI) is ubiquitous in linguistic (especially sociolinguistic) research literature (e.g., Dressler, 2014; Hansen Edwards, 2020; Palviainen and Bergroth, 2018; Gayton and Fisher, 2022), there is rarely any annotation on how the authors define the term in their research. Approaches mentioning LI rarely define identity or LI at all. Most research papers simply use the term "linguistic identity" or "multilingual identity" without further explanation. Moreover, in linguistics, identity is often equated with language (e.g., Gayton and Fisher, 2022; Kuo, 2009; Park, 2009, 2012; Sung, 2014, 2015, 2020, 2022; Wing et al., 2015) and obviously used as what is meant by "social identity" in social psychology and social sciences. What may still seem negligible when researching monolingual phenomena becomes obvious in multilingualism research: an imprecise definition/no definition at all - e.g., if adopting the term identity from other disciplines - inevitably leads to conceptual confusion, which can even make it impossible to gain further knowledge (compare Berthele's (2021) discussion on bi-/multilingualism).

2.2.2. Language as a missing part in identity models

The - more or less conscious and voluntary - decision of an individual for life in multilingualism has a clear identitarian dimension (Lüdi, 1996: 324) and there are good elaborations on the connection between language and identity and the respective interactions in classical linguistics as well as in social psychology and cultural studies. However, there has been a gap in linguistics, which arises from the research of "language without recourse to the phenomenon of language identity, which is essential for humans" (Pugliese, 2017: 254). In cultural and social sciences, the identity discussion has long since made a career assuming that personal identity, or group, or national identity cannot be conceived without language seen as the central identity-forming element (e.g., Krumm, 2020). Several pitfalls are pointed out in this section, that can arise in the reception of previous approaches to defining the concept of (linguistic) identity to be avoided.

In principle, the linguistic repertoire changes when the close interweaving of language and identity is exposed to different conditions (i.e., in migration processes) (Lüdi, 1996). So, every choice of variety, every accent and every use of transcodic markings may be seen as an "act of identity" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985), with which an individual more or less consciously expresses his or her belonging or self-concept and is almost forced to express an attitude (cf. Lüdi, 1996: 323f.). Despite this, the function of language in the identity discourse continues to play a subordinate role. This applies to both modern and postmodern identity theories, which are characterized by the fact that language as a

medium of identity constitution is given an inferior status (Kresić, 2007: 5). Language and language development hardly played a role in psychology (e.g., Keupp et al., 1999). In Erikson's well-known model of identity development; only a few comments are made on the relevance of language for child development (Kresić, 2007: 5). This neglect of the identity-constitutive function of language was criticized (Kresić, 2007: 5). To address this issue, Kresić (2006, 2007) proposes to include the potential identity-forming function of linguistic varieties that were rarely or not at all explicitly included in the respective identity model formations, being astonishing since linguistics and sociolinguistics, in particular, have been examining the connections between social affiliation since the 1960s and advocates an identity concept with four theses (Kresić, 2007: 6, 20):

- Identity is a flexible phenomenon in terms of characteristics, scope and temporal dimension.
- Identity is created/negotiated by the actors in communicative (sign-based) processes.
- These processes span both dialogic and narrative forms of communication.
- The flexibility and possible multiplicity of identity are based to a large extent on the inner-linguistic and foreign-linguistic, which is on the multilingual competencies of individuals.

Since the author agrees that language should be included in identity concepts, these four points offer a useful starting point for the analysis of identity in multilingual (and other) contexts.

2.2.3. Equating language and identity

If identity is coming up in linguistics, it is often equated with or based on the usage of language:

"It is important (...) that the first languages are taken into account so that the 'identity' of the bilingual or multilingual remains 'intact', especially that of children." (Dirim and Heinemann 2016, Auth. Transl.)

It seems, that losing a language or even reducing the usage in daily activities, the identity of an individual may be damaged or at least influenced in a negative way. Described somehow more detailed, language may be an identity-forming medium in two ways: (1) language is an important means of interaction between the individual and its self, of reflection and thus part of self-understanding, (2) language is a prerequisite for verbal interaction with others and language may be used by others to identify a person (cf. Krumm, 2020). After Kresić (2006), the (linguistic) staging of the self and interaction with other people are important elements of identity (cf. Krumm, 2020). Language may function as a means of determining a person's sense of identity when his/her language use and interaction with others are precisely perceived and analyzed (cf. Greule, 2003). The use of register, style, the choice of topics and the way someone talks about his/herself and others can tell us a lot about the self-concept the speaker might have.

2.2.4. Multiple, hybrid and multilingual identities

In recent years, the trend in disciplines like social psychology to use attributes like "multiple", "fluid" and "hybrid" to define the term "identity" became visible in linguistics as well (e.g., Kuo, 2009; Laakso et al., 2016; Leimgruber et al., 2022). Especially the question whether there is the "one identity" one has or if a person consists of "multiple identities" has been asked more frequently in recent decades. This applies not only to LI but to people's self-understanding as such:

"as a result of the almost nationwide Internet-based networks, many people have developed a tendency not to be satisfied with one identity, but to try out and try on several or many identities playfully. The phenomenon of multiple personalities, which used to be considered a psychopathological topic, has now become widespread,

at least among younger Internet users, and is treated as normal in social networks.” (Danzer, 2017: 7; Emph. i. O., Auth. Transl.)

Based on the theory of social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 2004 [1986]), several models and approaches for the concept of *multilingual* or other *multiple identities* have been developed in recent years. These include in particular:

- > Multiple linguistic identities (e.g., Kresić, 2006, 2007, 2016; Vukosav et al., 2021)
- > Hybrid identities (Foroutan, 2013)
- > Patchwork identity (Keupp et al., 2008 [1999])
- > Multiple ethnic identities (Bracker, 2017; Keupp et al., 2008 [1999])
- > Multiple identities (Stets and Serpe, 2013)
- > Fluid and overlapping identities (Laakso et al., 2016)

All of these terms include the notion of a plural identity that makes up each individual:

“People [...] have *multiple, fluid and overlapping identities*. While claiming to take pride in their ethnic origins and their heritage language, they may simultaneously strive for integration and assimilation.” (Laakso et al., 2016: 23; Auth. Emph.).

Thereafter, not only language (heritage language) is equated with identity, but also the awareness of one’s ethnic origin is associated with identity. If the concept of identity is so strongly subdivided and each property is understood as its own “identity”, e.g., as “cultural identity” (Leimgruber et al., 2022), then the approach of multiple or fluid identities is understandable but not yet helpful to explain what exactly is meant by identity.

2.2.5. Selected approaches to (multilinguals) identity in linguistic research

Although, there are approaches to analyze LI (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2004; Franceschini and Miecznikowski, 2004; Dirim and Auer, 2004; Riley, 2007; Block, 2006, 2007), “many approaches lack an adequate and useful definition of the phenomenon of linguistically constructed identity” (Kresić, 2009) why she set herself the goal to develop an approach to the identity concept that includes language (Kresić, 2006). The most extensive discussions of identity from a linguistic point of view (Auer, 2005; Kresić, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2016; Vukosav et al., 2021; Forbes et al., 2021) form the starting point for this paper’s further theoretical and empirical research on identity construction in multilingual contexts.

2.2.5.1. Kresić’s “multiple language identity model” and Simmel’s social circle model. Kresić (2006) developed a comprehensive model based on previous theoretical data from various disciplines, in particular social psychology. However, also her work on linguistic identity remains too encyclopedic and too often lacks conceptual clarity (Pugliese, 2017: 256; Sdroulia, 2007). Kresić (2007: 8) generally refers to the speaker as a “multi-identity speaker”, an individual who “does not implement several norms simultaneously, but successively in different speech situations and settings”.² Kresić’s somewhat abstract model of multiple language identities is composed of several “partial language identities” (Sdroulia, 2007: 48) and draws heavily on Simmel’s (1890) model of social circles and Sharifian’s (2011) model of cultural schemata.³ The author understands these partial entities more as a person’s social roles rather

² The “we identity” of a community of speakers is therefore constituted by the selection of a specific norm from the language system, while a personal identity is formed through the realization of specific norms in specific speech situations.

³ Kresić describes the multilingual identity “as the norm” following Halwachs’ (1993, 2001) model of language as a three-layer polysystem of collective repertoires with a core layer (basilect), an intermediate layer (mesolect) and the outer layer (acrolect) (Halwachs 1993: 73).

than a person’s identity (see Keupp et al., 2008 on the construction of identity and partial identities). Contrary, Kresić (2007: 5) criticizes Keupp et al. (1999) “patchwork identity” for the marginalization of the identity-constitutive function of language concerning the constitution of the individual partial identities. This criticism is entirely justified. Kresić (2006: 251) refers to the concept of partial identities explaining a multilingual individual. and describes the “languages of the medium of the multifaceted self” (Kresić, 2009) with her model of “multiple linguistic identity” (Kresić, 2006). She justifies her assumption “to show that none of us speak only one language as the language of our identity, but rather several languages that make up our multilingual, multifaceted self” (Kresić, 2009: 52).

Both, Simmel’s and Kresić’s models are based on the attempt to convert the complex network of relationships inherent to a human individual into a descriptive model. Kresić’s model visualizes well, how complex and intertwined the social, cultural and ethnic factors besides others are with the linguistic profile of the individuals showing, how the social component is to consider when researching LI. However, these models give a good starting point to describe the intertwined influences in which an individual’s identity is constructed and there are still several unanswered questions about the actual representation of linguistic structure described in this model. Ideally, the model may be extended to allow to capture the concept of identity especially when it comes to the analysis of multilingual individuals. The social roles in the sense of Simmel and Kresić’s reflections will benefit this papers aim to grasp what LI is all about.

2.2.5.2. Forbes et al.’s (2021) Model of the “multilingual identity”. In line with Aronin’s (2016) definition Forbes et al. (2021) argue that a person’s “multilingual identity” is shaped by their family history, social activities and personal life scenarios. They include historical, contextual and social factors which are prioritised in sociocultural and post-structural perspectives on identity (e.g., Norton and Toohey, 2011). However, the language is seen as the main factor in their definition as they call it “multilingual identity” in contrast to a monolingual identity emphasising (with or without intent) that language(s) plays a major role in the identity forming process. The role of education in developing “multilingual identity” is emphasized suggesting for improving attainment and overall engagement with language learning (Forbes et al., 2021). The author agrees that social, contextual and biographical factors including language use and language proficiencies may influence an individual’s identity formation. This however does not justify the term “multilingual identity” and moreover “multilingual identity” does not explain more than ‘identity of a person able to speak or understand more than one language’.

Though, a model of the linguistic dimension of identity construction derived from empirical language practice would be desirable for linguistics and models are always simplifications, previous approaches hardly notion specific tasks and situational structure of oral communication and specific oral genres (e.g., storytelling) as well as the participation structures (Sdroulia, 2007).⁴

2.2.5.3. Code-switching and linguistic identity. In multilingualism research “linguistic codes” are regularly described as identity markers and code-switching is understood as an “activation of different social identities” (Riehl, 2013; Auer, 1990).⁵ Gumperz (1982: 93) found each

⁴ Kresić (2006) assumes that understanding the human being must begin with understanding the language and sets herself the goal of understanding the functioning of language on a language-theoretical level to come to an understanding and model of the processes of identity constitution.

⁵ Riehl (2013) describes code-switching as the switching between two or more languages or varieties within the same communicative interaction whereby the change may affect both, individual lexemes and an entire section of discourse (Riehl, 2013: 385).

of the two codes being associated with certain discursive functions: the we-code is more suitable for a personal request, for involvement or personal expression of opinion, the they-code for a factual warning, for a distance about what is happening or for the presentation of general facts (Riehl, 2013: 388). All of these statements are certainly correct and well-documented. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether we-code and they-code should each be understood as a separate identity. The different linguistic codes are equated with identities, which would ultimately lead to *multiple identities of all multilingual individuals*. Since multilingualism is quite common, it would not be expedient for a better understanding to assume that all these multilingual people have multiple identities. The author does not agree with this interpretation why code-switching and identity of multilinguals will be addressed in the discussion section in more detail.

2.2.6. Summary of common approaches for the identity-analysis of multilingual individuals

In sum, identity may be understood as a feature for identification and differentiation that allows the unequivocal determination that it is precisely this person or thing. The attribution of identity by analyzing one's language competence and usage is used in both external assessment (h/she speaks x ... so h/she is y) and self-description (I speak x so I am y), with the former seeming to be more common. In linguistics, the most common approaches to LI from a functional perspective are: (1) Language acquisition and use as an identity-creating element, (2) Language (choice), i.e., register, as an expression of identity (Lüdi, 1996; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985), (3) Language as part of self-understanding and reflection, (4) Language is used by others as a feature to identify a person, (5) Linguistic identity as a synonym for language competence, (6) language use and language identity synonym (cf. Krumm, 2020; Kuo, 2009; Kresić, 2006; Riehl, 2013). The ability to use a language is often explained as a sign of belonging to the(se) respective language(s) speaker group(s) and thus referred to as an expression of identity. Therefore linguistic identity would mean to consider yourself as belonging to a certain group of people that speak your language.

2.3. Identity in psychology and social psychology and the applicability for linguistic research

Identity as used in linguistics is regularly based on the large body of research originating from psychology and social psychology since language is undeniably linked to social relationships. The societal and social influences on linguistic behavior is researched since the 1960s and language and identity research includes a whole range of scientific sub-disciplines: Sociology of language, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, conversation analysis, ethnographic approaches, variational linguistic approaches (Kresić, 2006: 41ff.). In psychology, identity is (simplified) defined as the answer to the question: "Who am I (really)?" (Myers, 2014: 212; Keupp, 2000; Keupp and Höfer, 1997: 7) supplemented by "Where am I going?" (Smith et al., 2007: 130), clarifying who someone is and referring to the a self-perception of inner unity despite changes in the external reality of life (Keupp, 2000). For the aim of this paper to better understand the concept of identity in relation to language, especially multilingualism, it is essential to consider the basic assumptions of social and psychological research, why the following sections summarize the essential approaches and assumptions for this paper.

2.3.1. Identity development as a process

In Social psychology, the concept of identity is not a static state that, once achieved, must be preserved, but rather subject to a constant process of change. whereby the core of identity is characterized by continuity and coherence and remains stable over the lifespan (Faltermaier et al., 2014; Straus and Höfer, 1997: 286). The self-concept is stable over a life span regardless of the possibility of change influenced

by changing surroundings and living conditions (Faltermaier et al., 2014).⁶

2.3.2. The terms identity and self or self-concept

In social psychology, the terms *identity* and *self* or *self-concept* are understood synonymously as in most cases, no important differences can be found between the concepts of *self* and *identity* why they can hardly be distinguished (Mummendey, 2006: 86). The almost inflationary use of the term *identity* in the cultural and social sciences (religious, personal, political, national, social, sexual identity, etc.), make a clear delimitation from other terms difficult (Mummendey, 2006: 85).

2.3.3. Identity as a group phenomenon and the concept of social and cultural identity

Identity is further seen as a group phenomenon, Mead (1995: 244ff.) described as a developmental process in the social network. The social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004 [1986]) is based on the assumption that individuals make their social environment more manageable through categorizing others as belonging to groups. Social identity is thus defined as that part of the self-concept that an individual gains from membership in a social group while individuals strive to maintain or improve their self-esteem towards a positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 2004 [1986]: 283f.).

Through "social categorizations" individuals form self-concept ideas in minority and majority groups, "social identities" (Tajfel and Turner, 2004; 1974, 1981), which are based on deriving the self-concept from belonging to certain social categories while at the same time denying belonging to other groups' arises and is usually accompanied by an appreciation of one's group and a devaluation of the foreign group (Mummendey, 2000: 38). The theory of social identity thus postulates a causal connection between intergroup discrimination and positive self-evaluation (Mummendey, 2000: 38).

It is further believed, that identity development is cultural-dependent and the self-concept is influenced and consequently shaped by different contextual conditions and therefore are not only social but also culture-dependent. Despite this, a great part of research is based on theories and constructs adapted to how *identity* and *self* are conceived in Western cultures (Dörfler et al., 2018: 539).⁷ In general, it is said, that individualistic cultures emphasize the needs of the individual while collectivistic cultures emphasize the needs of the group. As societal perspective has a significant impact on how members of a cultural group perceive themselves it should be kept in mind while analyzing individuals' identities. Likely, each culture uses different construction principles of the self. In this paper, the cultural perspective on identity construction cannot be deepened. However, it was mentioned, as empirical studies need to be aware of how the events in a person's environment have an impact on the individual (micro-level) and the member of a larger social structure (macro-level) (cf. Dörfler et al., 2018: 539).

2.3.4. Identity as a threatened value and multilingualism as a threat to identity and the ideology of monolingualism

Identity always becomes most conscious, when it is questioned (Fix, 2003: 111). In other words, precisely when "someone else points the finger at the identity features of the (other) group, to which their use of language belongs, and when he expresses a lack of understanding or non-acceptance of the actions of the other and thus damages his sense of identity" (Fix, 2003: 111). Especially in media and with political intent,

⁶ The process of social identity is all the more to be understood as an interaction adapted to constantly changing situations if this process has to take place under unstable circumstances (Lüdi, 1996: 323).

⁷ A Western construct that stems from an individualistic culture cannot simply be transferred. Over 70 percent of the world's population consists of collectivistic, non-individualistic cultures (Dörfler et al., 2018: 539).

identity is often associated with something alive that can be erased, strengthened or lost. Likewise, the loss of language is regularly associated with loss of culture or identity, as identity and self-concept are believed to be influenced by and socially and culturally constructed within a community. The idea that only a uniform language can ensure coexistence in a state has its origin in the 18th and 19th centuries when national identity was understood as a monolingual identity (Krumm, 2020). This idea still outweighs many common opinions on personal identity (Krumm, 2020). Consequently, multilingualism may be seen as a threat to national identity: Even if multilingualism is no longer a rarity, the positive effects of multilingualism are often dismissed while a negative perception of multilingualism continues (Laakso et al., 2016: 2; Oppenrieder and Thurmair, 2003: 50; Vossmiller, 2018). Although it is not only language that forms multilingual's identity, the "ideology of monolingualism" is far from being overcome, and bilinguals in particular rate their language-mixing and code-switching behavior as extremely negative (Oppenrieder and Thurmair, 2003: 50; Gumperz, 1982). The perception and acceptance of multilingualism are always assessed individually, but remain dependent on social acceptance; often, the language of origin is neglected as an integral part of the identity formation of migrant people (Vossmiller, 2018: 53).

2.3.5. Identity is stable over the life span

Identity is understood as stable construct with which the subjective trust in one's competence to maintain continuity and coherence is formulated (Erikson, 1956; Keupp, 2000; Faltermaier et al., 2014). From Erikson's phase model to Tajfel's and Turner's social identity theory to the modern multiple identity construction of postmodernism, countless attempts have been made to embed the concept of identity in clearly definable references (Smith et al., 2007: 131). It is no longer assumed that an individual in early adulthood would have achieved a secure identity basis that would ensure a successful life (Keupp, 2000). Rather, the development of identity is understood as a permanent, lifelong process (Faltermaier et al., 2014: 204; Keupp, 2000; Straus and Höfer, 1997). In sum, the concept of identity (or self) in current social psychology is characterized as a self-reflective project that includes constant development and self-improvement (Keupp, 2000, 2001).

Beyond, psychology distinguishes several forms of identity including pathological developments⁸ such as identity confusion, identity crisis, identity conflict, identity diffusion to identity fragmentation (Dammann et al., 2011: 281). These will not be discussed here, but it should be emphasized, that partial and multiple identities as often used in recent research are highly problematic. Having all this said on the concept of identity in psychology and social psychology the methodology to analyze the identity of the multilingual Kui is to explain.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection process

3.1.1. Choosing the area of research: multilingualism in a political border area

The border region of Laos, Thailand and Cambodia with a multiple language contact scenario proves to be particularly fruitful for investigating the concept of identity in multilingualism. Approaching the identity-concept always involves considering demarcation and exclusion, belonging and stigmatization among others. Language changes and language-political considerations as well as the negotiation of borders are part of everyday life, especially in multilingual societies. The Kui, living in this region of three nations, offers an exemplary subject of investigation particularly well suited for examining the construction of

identity in multilingual contact phenomena.

3.1.2. Research process and choosing the individuals for research: self-concept of multilinguals

The Kui in Northeastern Thailand, chosen as an example for the analysis of the identity construction (self-concept) from a linguistic perspective are mostly multilingual in daily life with at least three or four languages (active and passive use). Data were collected during three months of fieldwork and online using video-based and text-based social media from different perspectives, the following methods were used: Eight audio-recorded interviews (in Thai and Kui, 40–60 Min. each), four group discussions (with three to six participants, 40–60 Min. each), field observations and additional literature review.

Research was carried out with a set of ethnomethodological methods within several months in early 2019 and 2020. Additionally, to participating observation, group discussions (4–6 persons, 1–2 h each), and free interviews of individual speakers, a multiple-choice questionnaire with more than 100 items was developed by the author based on multiple sources (Clifton et al., 2002; Tomioka, 2016; Kondakov, 2011; Magaspag, 2012; Schulze, 2014). The questionnaire was translated into Thai to ensure proper understanding. In addition to the personal information, information on language skills, use and choice as well as language identity, attitudes and awareness was collected in the questionnaire. Some items contained options for specific answers. The questionnaire was pilot-tested twice and then slightly modified before being given to the main participants (for full questionnaire and question types see Siebenhütter, 2022).

Local Kui speakers helped select speakers and administer the survey. A total of 211 speakers took part in the survey (including the two pre-tests). Most of the speakers answered the online questionnaire in Thai. However, some respondents (particularly older villagers) provided oral responses that were recorded and coded later in the assessment phase. The local Kui speakers form nine age cohorts, almost half of which were between the ages of 19 and 25. Respondents included men (35%) and women (65%), and most (75%) had completed more than six years of school. However, a significant minority (19%) had four to six years of schooling and some (5%) only two to three years.

Questionnaire results cannot be taken as certain facts, because stereotypes may be included, which the participants themselves may not be aware of. But the results may provide tendencies and specific areas of social interaction to which attention should be paid for further information during participatory observation. Speakers are usually not aware of their unconscious motives and stereotypes. In addition, such topics may be taboo and are usually not openly spoken about, why they cannot be asked for directly.

As identity is hardly ever a clear concept to laypersons, it cannot be asked for directly using qualitative interviews, as Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023) tried in their study. Although their participants spoke at length about identity-related issues, the authors had to confess that no consistent picture emerged (Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos, 2023: 167). Research must start at the points that can reveal identity-forming characteristics and behavior. Ethnomethodologically methods, such as participatory observation, are well suited to this goal; data can be successively recorded, confirmed, updated and continuously deepened over a longer period. Identity and the role of language in the formation of identity among the Kui were addressed at several points by observing the practices and rituals in the social environment and the awareness and reflection of the speakers themselves about their actions. The research included both individual-biographical and social (group) dimensions. While the interviews, group discussions and field observations provided valuable insights into daily behavior and the thinking of the speakers, the written questionnaires offered additional metadata such as age, sex etc. A total of 210 individuals (35% male, 65% female; 15–68 years of age) answered written questionnaires to collect metadata and additional data on language attitudes (stereotypes), awareness and self-assessed competences etc.

⁸ A deficiently developed identity can lead to considerable difficulties for an individual, which according to the ICD 10 (WHO, 1993; ICD, 2021) are pathological and therefore require treatment.

4. Data analysis process and findings

4.1. A fourfold approach to the identity of the Kui

Approaching the role of language in identity construction i.e., linguistic identity or language-related identity with a more or less standardized examination method, the following points were addressed in the analyzation process:

- The concept of the mother tongue and the L1-language(s)
- Linguistic competences and preferences
- Language choice and language contact
- Language awareness
- Social interaction and communication in groups and across groups

After participants shared their experiences, their statements were analyzed by content analysis (cf. [Mayring, 2000](#)) according to the above features regarding a linguistic identity were encoded in units of meaning. All codes were grouped thematically into language competence, language awareness, etc. and from the four perspectives (self-assessment, external evaluation etc.). To make the participants' statements clear in the description of the results, central quotations were woven into the following text (cf. [Kuckartz, 2012](#)). The presentation of the results was initially descriptive. The conclusions then represent an interpretation of the description.

To research the (linguistic) identity of the Kui four perspectives were chosen: (1) The self-assessment, (2) The external evaluation by the researcher or others not belonging to the Kui group and (3) The official view or ideology, i.e., the attitude taken by the government or the media, which is often enforced in Southeast Asia with language policy measures and (4) Impact of the environment on Kui identity. Data were evaluated from four perspectives (see [Figs. 2–4](#)) using explanatory content analysis ([Mayring, 2000](#)). Data evaluation was completed by systematically literature research. Consultation of additional material and others research results could complete the picture and avoid the researcher's bias to a certain degree.

4.1.1. The self-concept

The Kui interviewed in the field research in 2019 proved to be interested in my work and were happy to talk about their language. That is not a matter of course. It seemed that there was a great interest in keeping the Kui minority language active and making it known (i.e., teaching Kui voluntary to school children or teaching Kui on Youtube). The speakers were proud of their origins and happily said they honoured and kept alive the language and heritage of their ancestors („i am kui from surin province thailand i proud to be born kui i thought kui people lived in surin province more than 300000“ (see [Siebenhütter, 2022](#) for further examples). This affirmative and positive attitude of the speakers was also found in the younger generation of less than 25-year-olds. Individuals born and living in Thailand seem to take pride in being Thai, regardless of whether they were born as ethnic minorities or not ([Ricks, 2019](#)). This is consistent with the finding that ethnic minorities often report that their first language is Thai, despite using Kui, Lao or other local languages for most of their daily life ([Siebenhütter, 2020](#)).



Fig. 2. Three perspectives of Kui identity.

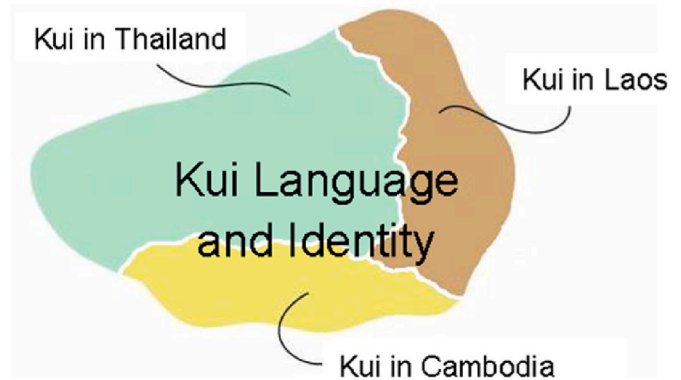


Fig. 3. Influence of the environment on Kui identity in three nation-states.

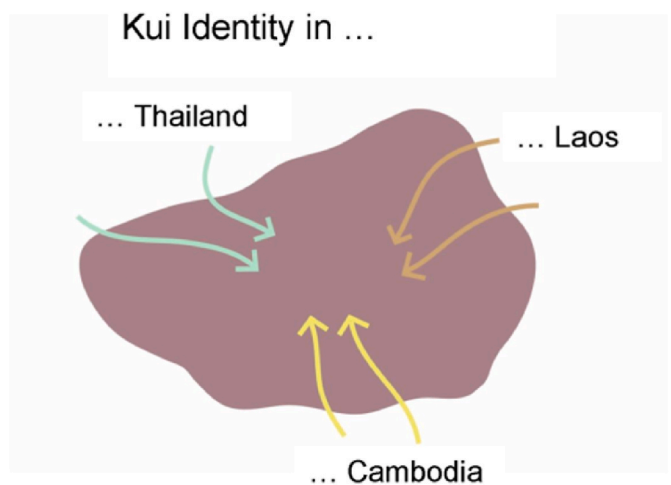


Fig. 4. Common identity of the Kui despite their place of living.

4.1.2. The external evaluation

The second perspective was to review the external evaluation Kui experience. In terms of social status, Kui, Khmer, Lao and Isan (Lao in Thailand) may be (more or less conscious) classified as Low Prestige Languages (LPL), while Thai and Chinese are given a higher status and are therefore associated with High Prestige (HPL) ([Siebenhütter, 2020, 2022](#); [Tomioka, 2016](#)). The external view was retrieved from literature and fieldnotes by the author. While the self-concept aims to capture the Kui's own evaluation of being Kui, the external evaluation should show the perspective others (i.e., Khmer in Northeast Thailand, Thai in Bangkok, etc.). The external evaluation was identified as an important function in the awareness and the experience of an identitarian self-understanding becoming manifest as identity when the individual becomes aware of their identity when they step back and see themselves through the eyes of the other ([Fix, 2003: 111](#)). The individual thus enters a meta-level, the level of reflection ([Fix, 2003: 111](#)). Accordingly, identity only becomes real and conscious through this reflection, the observation from the outside.

4.1.3. The official view/ideology

The third perspective sheds light on the official ideology concerning identity in Thailand. Only a third of Thailand's residents speak Central Thai as their first language ([Ricks, 2019: 257](#)). Despite this, ethnic mobilization in Thailand remains minimal due to the wide public acceptance of the government-recognized Thai identity. Minorities in Thailand are culturally assimilated into the majority of the population as part of the "Thaiization" to achieve a uniform cultural identity ([Siebenhütter, 2022](#)). Support for Thai is strong even among the country's

most disadvantaged populations, such as the Isan people of northeastern Thailand (see Ricks, 2019). According to self-identification studies, most residents of Thailand hold the view that it is better to be Thai than to be assigned to another ethnic group (Ricks, 2019: 257). The identity problem is not limited to the minorities in Thailand. Also, the majority of the Thai population is aware of the issue and young Thais in particular complain about a lack of identity in Thailand (Blümel, 2019). The demand for identity-creating measures may be an expression of a lack of personal identity experience:

“The fewer individuals or groups feel about themselves, the more energetically they call for and search for identity and identity-creating measures: Personal or I-identity, corporate identity, national, ethnic and religious identities or patchwork identity are terms that have been the shape public debate in the Western world [i.e. in] conferences of reputable companies (corporate identity) as well as psychotherapy processes (ego identity) or sociologist congresses (patchwork identity).” (Danzer, 2017: 13; Auth. Transl. and Emph.)

The ideology promoted by a nation state cannot be ignored by researching residents' self-concept. Therefore, the official view is included as one source of data to be evaluated for this research. Especially in Thailand, where the government promotes a strong national 'Thai feeling' (Blümel, 2019), it is not surprising that the study participants identified themselves as Thai and said their first language was Thai. Although many of the less educated people in the Northeast are unable to speak Central Thai with confidence (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 226). However, to use the "we code" which "plays the role of an intragroup marker", this "can only be used conveniently by people in the same group and must not be casually shared with possible outsiders" (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 226). This assumes that speakers must be sufficiently confident in the language of their choice. This does not appear to be the case with the minority speakers in northeastern Thailand (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 226). Furthermore, people from Bangkok and Central Thailand looked down on residents of the Northeast (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 232). Despite or (better) because of these facts, minority speakers in north-eastern Thailand seem to prefer to be 'Thai' and belong to the 'higher-class city dwellers' rather than being seen as 'second-class citizens'. (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 232). The "we code" does not necessarily refer to the ethnic language of a multilingual community and the "they code" refers to the language of the broader society in which that community forms a minority. It is likely that the Kui minority belongs to the group of Thais and does not evaluate the majority language as "they code", but there can be more than one "we code".

4.1.4. Impact of the environment on Kui identity

Language data and self-evaluation was further analyzed according the influence by their environment. As shown on the map (Fig. 1), the Kui live in three nation-states, each with its national language. Therefore, Kui are exposed to different living environments that influence their being. The impact of the environment is existing, despite the possibility of generating and maintaining a common self-image regardless of the current living environment. It is assumed, as indicated in Fig. 4, the Kui have a common basis despite their environmental influences on which they can identify as a group regardless of their living environment or their L1 language(s) spoken.

4.1.5. Approaching the common or group identity of the Kui

Figs. 3 and 4 attempt a visual representation of the national influences on Kui identity as a group in the three nation-states with an area where the Kui overlap as one identity. This means that even if there are different influences from the respective national cultures, the Kui did show a shared identification with being Kui that is equally present in all three national areas. Certainly, these figures are a simplification and not meant to equate the nation state with identity nor to equate language

and identity. The purple-colored area in Fig. 4 represents the common identity of the Kui, i.e., an overlapping identity of the Kui, no matter where they originally come from or where they currently live. It should be illustrated by Figs. 3 and 4 that Kui identity is not equal with the language(s) spoken or understood and also not equal with the national area (Cambodia, Thailand or Laos) they live in.

The research primarily focused on the self-concept of the Kui. However, as the author understands identity not only as self-understanding but also a positioning of an individual in a society, the external perspective was included. The outside perspective can have a significant impact on the identity of individuals and groups - so it plays a role in how those who are outside the boundaries of their group see and evaluate this group. In the given case, for example, this is the view of the societies in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia on the Kui.

Self-Image: Kui's self-image or self-concept is captured through the stories Kui tell about themselves. These stories show the Kui's view of their experiences and their selection and reflect - at least in part - their attitudes, including their linguistic minority status (see Methods: qualitative interviews and collection of narratives and stories).

External image: This includes the official view (evaluation of previous research using literature research) and ideology in the nation-states as well as the behavior recorded through participatory observation over a longer period, which is evaluated in qualitative analysis: Self-image, external image and composition of the identity of the Kui).

In the case of the Kui, it can be assumed that in the course of their socialization they develop "a special kind of intercultural competence" (Vossmiller, 2018: 54), namely the linguistic mastery of the cultural codes of at least two systems. Intercultural competence is usually spoken of when two different cultures, such as the Chinese and the German, meet. However, intercultural competence should be understood here in such a way that it describes the ability of individuals to remain competent and able to act when encountering another culture, even if the degree of "foreignness" and "otherness" represents a variable phenomenon. Vossmiller (2018: 54) describes this ability as a "self-confident handling of linguistic know-how and its constant further development", which, from the author's point of view, should not be taken for granted just because the individuals themselves accept this as an almost natural fact, without himself far-reaching importance to make too aware.

In addition to self-assessment and the image of others, there is the official view, i.e., the publicly communicated view of how the people of a state or territory should be. These are mostly ideological or political views and values.

A further basis for comparison is achieved by recording parallel developments and content overlaps within the stories that the Kui in three nation-states (Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) have preserved and passed on. These can be similar or identical developments and plots in the narratives, or approximate quintessence and lessons that the stories hold in store for the people or that the speakers themselves ascribe to them - in short: cultural overlaps in the form of textual material and stored cultural material in the form of ideas that are recorded and passed on through the (biographical) narration of stories.

4.2. Findings related to language, identity and the self-concept of the Kui

4.2.1. The first language (L1) and the "mother tongue"

To approach identity from a linguistic perspective, language skills were explored. The Kui are generally multilingual with Kui plus two or more first languages learned from birth on (first languages or L1 languages). Further, the "so-called mother tongue" was explored. Speakers were not familiar with the concept "mother tongue" and asked for further explanation when being asked "What is your mother tongue?". Also in linguistics, there is disagreement on how to define "mother tongue" or if the concept is already obsolete as it transports unwanted connotations. See Laakso et al. (2016) for an excellent discussion on the terms *mother tongue*, *heritage language* and *national language*. The author

though finds the term “L1” describes the first language(s) a person learns more appropriate while the term “mother tongue” remains unclear and causes misunderstandings. The answers Kui gave to the question “What is your mother tongue?” confirmed that the concept of *mother tongue* is just as unclear as that of identity and can contribute little to a better understanding of multilingual speakers and their sense of identity. During interviews, Kui themselves once called Thai and another time Kui as their mother tongue. Doing so, the Kui showed influences by the national language and society, i.e., many Kui in Thailand refer to themselves as Thai and not as Kui, analogously happening in Laos and Cambodia. However, despite such results all of the participants of the research identify themselves as Kui. It turned out, that the response behavior certainly also depends on the questioner (another Kui-speaker or a researcher from another country), the language of the survey (Kui, Thai or English) and the medium of the survey (in person or online or paper). The Kui seem tending to conform to the questioner and also cast their answers in light of “social desirability” depending on the context. LI cannot ultimately be determined by the concept of “mother tongue” and not to L1 either.

4.2.2. Language competences, language use and language choice in language contact

Linguistic competencies and respective use in daily life are besides the L1 or heritage language the most often mentioned factors connected to LI. The Kui analyzed, showed all levels of language competencies in Kui, Lao, Khmer, Thai etc. (from “fluent” to “not able to communicate in Kui at all”). There was no correlation found between the identification as “Kui” and the level of language competence. Language use is related to a more or less conscious choice of a speaker in a contact situation with other languages. To find out, which motivations determine multilingual contact and what motivates people – here the Kui - to behave in a certain way, to choose a particular language in a specific situation, it was asked how Kui speakers decide in daily life for one or another language. From a psychological or socio-psychological perspective, it seems necessary to recognize and understand the needs on which (linguistic) action is based and finally how the Kui build their “sociolinguistic identity”.

Certainly, in different ways and with different emphasizes at different times, the choice is made regarding the L1 of minority Kui speakers, with sometimes Kui, sometimes Lao, Thai or Khmer being assigned as “mother tongue” experienced (Siebenhütter, 2020). Interestingly, it turned out to be a Western bias to expect that the individual would have to choose a language, at least in feeling. For the Kui, a “better than/rather than” classification seems neither relevant nor necessary. Rather, the question of the preferred language caused astonishment. It seems only logical to you that the language is adapted depending on the context and the participants in the conversation. This could be due to the multilingualism of the families and the multilingual socialization at home, at school and in the community in which children grow up. For example, there is a local practice of multilingual prayer. However, it may be possible that their strong identification is related to the successful isolation of a sense of national identity (Ricks, 2019).

4.2.3. Language awareness

The Kui were found to be aware of their ethnic heritage and the chance of its extinction, why some are actively not only trying to preserve their language, but also cultivating traditional practices (Siebenhütter, 2020, 2022). This awareness in no way precludes the individual speaker from being able to adapt to other groups linguistically or in terms of other cultural practices at any time, for example, the Thai group as a large, superordinate group. The self-concept of being Kui is not lost in this process, neither is their identity shifting to be only Thai; rather both sociocultural groups can exist at the same time and as the Kui are able to speak Thai and Kui besides other languages, they can identify themselves with both linguistic and cultural backgrounds without having to repel or lose one of them leading to “identity erasure” as proposed by Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023: 162, 168).

5. Discussion

5.1. How can the identity of multilingual speakers be captured?

Firstly, it was asked, how Kui identity can be analyzed. The identity or the self-concept of the Kui could not be captured directly by asking the speakers to describe their identity as this concept is rarely well-defined among laypersons – and as this paper objected – also among linguists not as clear as would be desirable. Rather, it was captured using a fourfold approach and found represented by a combination of several markers in the findings. Some of them are individual and some features could be found as shared by the larger group of the Kui. Simplified, the Kui identity, according this research, can be described as a combination of shared experiences, shared narrations, shared language, shared rituals and practices and beliefs and a shared environment. There was no evidence found, that the shared language competence or use need to reach a certain level to “feel” and identify as Kui. To analyze Kui identity, the keywords reflexivity, self-reflexivity, self-realization, authenticity, and narrativity deserve special attention. Reflexivity and self-reflection mean the self-perception of the Kui minority speakers to other members of their own and other groups (e.g., Khmer, Thai, and Laotians). Self-actualization is to be understood in the sense of the possibilities that one’s linguistic background opens up (e.g.: “How can I use my linguistic and ethnic background to improve my chances?”; “When do I want to hide my linguistic or ethnic background so as not to unnecessarily expose myself to risks or reduce my chances of success?”). Authenticity is closely linked to narration, the coherent life story. The Kui society that does not have its own writing system and written documentation of stories lives on through the oral tales that are passed on to the following generations.

Secondly it was asked, if Kui identity equal to Kui language or if multilingual language use is leading to multilingual identity (which would be equal to the identification with multiple self-concepts due to speaking multiple languages). The multilingualism of the Kui and the interactions with the concept of Kui identity goes into more detail on these connections. Findings showed Kui could be seen as a language without an identity signal and rather be described as situational functional multilingualism. Elements of Kui identity are among others the following: Shared social practices and rituals (i.e., clothing, jewelry, objects, common rituals and practices (also historical) including the proximity to elephants in rituals and practices. This includes shared historical narratives and myths. However, of course, not all of these are present in Kui people’s daily life, which is in a way quite “modern”.

Language use and language choice in Kui’s daily routine is multilingualism and a situational choice of languages according to the context. To a certain degree, Kui are aware of their linguistic choice behavior in daily life. However, most of them are rather starting to think about their language use when asked for it for the first time. The language choice could be found to be related to a lower expected prestige and sometimes shame about their background being born in North-eastern Thailand.

Linguistic demarcation and its “identity-forming” function.

- > Linguistic inclusion and exclusion
- > Linguistic prestige: Positive prestige compared to one’s status (Kui) can be measured, but also shame when fearing devaluation by outsiders
- > Language can mark and reinforce belonging
- > A multilingual, stable situation is not perceived as a “special feature” or particular difficulty; rather, asking questions stimulates reflection

5.1.1. Identity is not language or code - code-switching and linguistic identity

Code-switching was described to activate different social identities in former research (Riehl, 2013; Auer, 1990). It was described that

speakers use different codes in the discourse for reasons of identity and that the decision for one code or the other does not primarily depend on the speaker's competence. However, from the author's point of view and from the findings of this research, there is no indication that each code is linked to its own identity. If the concept of identity is understood as something enduring, something that remains essentially the same over life span (Keupp, 2000; Faltermaier et al., 2014), the acquisition and use of further languages for the individual cannot mean a splitting of his existing identity, nor the acquisition of new further identities. For clarification, it is suggested to stick with the fact that an individual has an Identity that is subject to a permanent process in the course of existence but cannot increase or decrease quantitatively or even be erased as suggested by Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023). It can therefore be stated that the code choice is not solely determined by competence and that code or language is not to be equated with identity. However, the extraordinary amount of language and linguistic variability multilinguals have at their disposal (Berthele, 2021) makes it possible to shift between languages.

Language choice of the Kui was always negotiated in the conversation which goes in line with Riehl (2013). However, a conscious choice of language may also reveal the intention to hide one's heritage due to shame also evaluated for some Kui in Bangkok. Similar behavior was found in earlier research (e.g., Nassenstein, 2015) describing how speakers choose their language when visiting neighbourhoods, also to hide the fact that they do not come from its area. However, this was a less important factor among the Kui than the motivation to be able to communicate in each respective situation and be able to participate in trade, work or university speech.

5.1.2. (Linguistic) identity is not equal to social role

Kresić (2006) created a complex model of LI that reminds strongly of Simmel's social circles ("Soziale Kreise") or social roles in Simmel's (1890), including linguistic registers and styles when describing "partial language identities". Also Fix (2003: 107) states, there cannot be "one identity" or "the identity at all". Accordingly, social identity always refers to the group to which it is bound in its self-understanding.

"Identity and identification that are linked to language always refer to a group identity, i.e., to several people who have common characteristics and who, because of these common characteristics, feel like they belong together, as a group. Language can also be such a feature. According to this view, each of us has several identities and some of them – not all – are linguistically marked and symbolized." (Fix, 2003: 107; Auth. Transl.)

The author does not agree with the idea an individual would have partial or multiple identities as proposed by Kresić (2006, 2007), Fix (2003) or Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023) and asked whether it is more useful to see the concept of identity in less detail without immediately interpreting every social role and every ability and competence as a single identity. The concept of social circles Simmel (1890) and the classification of the individual in different role contexts that have to be fulfilled are quite helpful instead. However, these are *roles* and not *identities* and they should not be equated. A role always allows only a snapshot, because every person uses different roles every day. Equating role and identity would neglect what constitutes the "life-span-unchanging core" (Mumm, 2018: 25) that was described in the literature review. The individual can exercise different roles in his living environment and his social relationships and move in different social circles. For example, a young man who leaves the role of "apprentice" and assumes a new social role of "family father" does not normally lose his identity, nor does he thereby acquire an additional one. Identity is and remains stable over time and present at its core in any role and any social circle. In other words: the individual has an identity only once, even though this identity is in constant change and may be subject to constant development as a process (Faltermaier et al., 2014). The proposed "partial identities" (Keupp, 2000) seems just as misleading, as this

term suggests that the individual can be split up into individual parts that have nothing to do with one another. This goes in the direction of what psychology understands as "Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)". A severe identity disorder, identity loss, characterized by almost no coherent self-image or sense of identity leading to identity confusion, crisis, diffusion, and fragmentation used to be considered a psychopathological issue, became widely treated as normal (Danzer, 2017: 7; Dammann et al., 2011: 281; Siebenhütter, 2022). Research gave evidence that adding L2 or L3/L4 does not lead to a split personality, 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Pavlenko, 2006: 3). Bilinguals explaining to have "definitely two different ways of being me" (Pavlenko, 2006: 24), are likely referring to their perception of themselves under certain conditions or in different (social) contexts. Social roles, language and emotional bonds may certainly affect *identity* but they are not *identity*. Therefore, it is more reasonable to speak of one identity and multiple (social) roles. The roles assumed in different situations show that not all characteristics of one's own identity are expressed in every situation, but that these have not been lost or belong to another (partial) identity, but merely become less manifest in the role currently being performed.

At this point, it should be remembered that it is always about creating a fit between the subjective "inside" and the social "outside", i.e., the production of an individual social location. Keupp describes that the need for individual identity construction refers to the basic human need for recognition and belonging. It should "allow the subject, who can be defined anthropologically as a 'deficient being', to locate himself", provide an individual definition of meaning and open up socially acceptable forms of satisfaction for individual needs. Identity thus forms a self-reflective hinge between the inner and outer world and inner and outer experience. It is precisely in this function that the double character of identity becomes visible: Identity should represent the unique individual, but represent the socially acceptable at the same time and therefore, identity always represents a compromise between one's own sense and conformity (Keupp, 2000). This is the fundamental problem of "equality in diversity" that dominates current identity theories. According to Volkan (2011: 238), the constant feeling of being the same as oneself (Erikson, 1956) as a partial aspect of identity can be aptly described by the term "core identity".

Even if identity is not a static state, the concept of "identity" can be looked at from different scientific-disciplinary perspectives: "the psychological understanding of the category in the sense of 'being yourself' – keywords 'self-concept' and 'self-esteem'" and more in the sociological Meaning as "the concept of 'social identity' (Dittmar 1997: 81, 133f.) or of 'collective identity' (Barbour and Stevenson, 1998: 133)." (Fix, 2003: 107).

General characteristics in abridged form: the partial or total loss of normal integration of consciousness related to memories, awareness of identity and immediate sensations, and control of bodily movements, unexplained by physical disease. A major diagnostic criterion is the inability to remember important personal information, which is too pronounced for simple forgetfulness. This would imply that the individual "partial identities" or "partial personalities" have no knowledge of each other, which is not the case in the case of a simple assumption of roles in everyday social life. The father remembers playing with the children well, even if this does not play a role in business negotiations in a professional context.

A person has different social and situational identities and yet is always identical to himself. At the same time, he represents and presents different types of self and at the same time has a more or less stable concept of himself (Mummendey, 2006: 86). In contrast to Mummendey (2006), the author does not understand the functions of individuals as family members, employees or members of a group as "social identities" but as roles. Thus, as illustrated in Fig. 5, an individual has a stable core, and personal identity, and fulfils the demands of different roles in work, leisure, family, and other relationships and affiliations, depending on the situation throughout their life, as shown in Fig. 5 illustrated. These in turn form the social identity of an individual with all their relationships

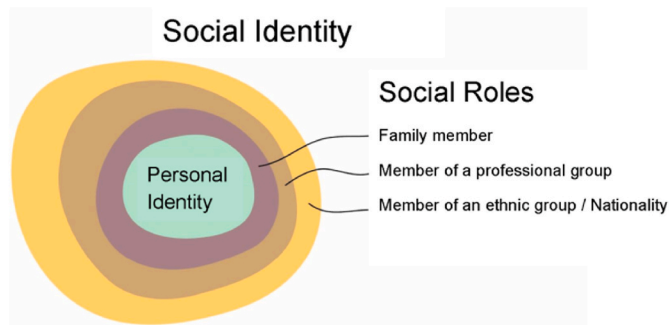


Fig. 5. Social identity combines social roles and a core of personal identity.

with other individuals in their social environment. These different roles, sometimes also described in research as partial identities, meta-identities or selves (Myers, 2014: 212; Straus and Höfer, 1997: 281, 303), do not lead to a multiple identity. This statement is important, even if, following the evaluation of the identity concepts of different disciplines, it can be stated that a comprehensive view of such a complex phenomenon as identity represents is helpful and necessary. In short, identity in this sense can be understood as a developing, stable and at the same time dynamic personality core.

In this paper, identity is understood in a culture-specific and culture-dependent manner. In Southeast Asia, as is often the case in Asian countries, the formation of identity is defined more by mutual dependencies, i.e., by belonging to a group, and less by independence and individual characteristics (Myers, 2014: 161). Along with this, it is important to nurture and maintain relationships, fit into one's role, and meet group expectations (Myers, 2014: 161). It is obvious that the Kui – not only linguistically – adapt to the circumstances, i.e., reality, and try less to change them, which might be more the case in individualistic societies.

5.2. Ethnicity, nationality, identity and language

In a discussion about identity, especially in research on minorities, sooner or later, ethnicity or ethnic identity comes up. One difficulty is certainly that terms such as ethnicity are often politically and ideologically misused: Since language alone is no longer sufficient to establish a region as a state, ethnic ideology is increasingly being sought (cf. Minnich, 2006: 106). Thus, the terminology, as the author would like it to be understood in this paper, is addressed briefly. There have been numerous attempts to clear the thicket of definitions, e.g., in measuring cultural, ethnic and national identity: *Ethnic identity* was measured with items assessing ethnic confirmation, e.g., sense of belonging, and positive feelings about being a group member (Sample item: 'I feel that I am part of the [ethnic] culture.'). *National identity* was assessed with measures of national affirmation and the importance of one's national identity (Sample item: 'I am happy that I am [national].') (Berry et al., 2010: 23). Methods to capture *national identity* (Phinney et al., 1997) and *ethnic identity* are provided by Phinney (1992) and (Phinney and Ong, 2007).

This is important because political borders often serve as a reason (or pretext) to impose (or attempt to impose) a national identity on the populations living in a geographical area. At the same time, there are tendencies towards a longing for belonging, for a unit that is ultimately supposed to serve economic purposes. Just think of the many statements about a European identity that can be found in the media and science (Eder, 2007). A community-forming identity may be beneficial to the personal well-being of the people settled in the geographical area, but also serves the purposeful, comprehensive enactment of laws and regulations that are intended, for example, to facilitate the economic activities of the companies based there. Existing differences may not be overcome with a shared identity, but at least they are not in the

foreground when joint action is beneficial. The unity of Europe for example consists of the diversity of differences, which has long occupied historical-comparative social science (Eder, 2007: 188): Communicating difference can generate identity and simultaneously communication of identity generates difference. This reciprocal relationship is important for a communication-based understanding of the drawing of boundaries in non-hierarchical systems, as can be found among the Kui and possibly frequently in Southeast Asia.

5.2.1. Connections between language, culture and ethnicity

As the third research question it was asked, if language is an important identification factor from the perspective of the speakers, from outsiders and in general in Thailand. It could be shown that not only language (Kui and other Southeast Asian languages) is regularly equated with identity, but also one's ethnic origin. It became clear that the concept of identity should not be divided too much understanding each property as its own "identity". Kui use different languages as a matter of course and by no means only regard the actual Kui language as their mother tongue. Even the external assessment of the Kui, for example by people from the metropolis of Bangkok, could not show that the language was used as a decisive means of identification. In addition to appearance (according to statements, north-east Thais look different in their physiognomy) and behavior and clothing as non-urban and possibly also as originating from the poorer north-east play an important role in determining identity from the outside. It was not at all only the language used as an identity-forming feature, although language also played a role.

When approaching identity from a linguistic perspective, it is important not to rashly equate multiple language use (hybrid language use) and hybrid social identity (Auer, 2005). Such an equation can be as difficult as that of nation and language underlying traditional European language ideologies. This is of interest given that only one-third of Thailand's residents use Central Thai as their first language, yet ethnic mobilization in Thailand remains minimal due to wide public acceptance and recognition of the government-established Thai (national) identity (Ricks, 2019: 257).

Hans-Bianchi (2016: 244) describes *ethnic identity* as a special kind of *social identity*. This ethnic-cultural affiliation is subject to constant change and adaptation throughout life, just as the reality of the individual and thus everyday life can change depending on external conditions (Hans-Bianchi, 2016: 244). However, there is also evidence that the coupling of language with domains of culture and ethnicity mentioned here is not universal (s. Schulze, 2010). He argues:

"If one understands by 'culture' the fact that individuals of a group open up their world through social constructions and the symbolization of generalized experiences, options for action and specific patterns of world interpretation, this does not necessarily mean that language is involved. The specification of culture in the form of ethnicity can certainly do without recourse to 'language'." (Schulze, 2010: 41; Auth. Transl.)

Thereafter, language would be not only independent of culture; the concept of ethnicity would also be conceivable independently of language. Schulze (2010) leads for such a language-free ethnicity definition of the classic Caucasian small societies, whose construction of "cultural identity, i.e., ethnicity" essentially takes place via other factors. They are (1) clan membership, (2) the possibility of adopting foreign-language individuals, (3) reference to mythological ancestors and specifics of material culture (such as handicraft products), (4) topographical and sociological specifics, such as endogamy/exogamy (Schulze, 2010: 42). According to Schulze (2010), *cultural identity* equals *ethnicity* and consists of belonging, reference to a common history, specific material goods and products, topographical characteristics and sociological similarities.

Mumm (2018) analyzes the key concepts of these terms: language communities arise through communicative processes of

conventionalization and are further maintained by them. These processes are real, i.e., observable, complex and constantly evolving (Mumm, 2018: 1). In contrast, ethnicity is a construction based on practiced socio-political distinctions between 'us' and 'others' (Mumm, 2018: 1). A key feature of ethnicity, but not of language community, is the boundary with others; There are also boundaries in language communities, but they are more fluent and do not define any characteristics (Mumm, 2018: 1). The social mechanisms behind language community and ethnicity are completely different: if the language community is often seen as a key criterion of ethnicity, the concept of identity plays a central role (Mumm, 2018: 1). It is no coincidence that ethnicity is also called ethnic identity, and it is no coincidence that ethnicity and ethnic awareness are just as fatally mixed up as identity and identity awareness (Mumm, 2018: 82). Trying to finally unravel the terminology, Mumm proposes the following short definitions for the conceptual formation of language community, ethnicity (awareness) and culture, which have different roots (Mumm, 2018: 82):

- > Linguistic community: conventionalization in communication
- > Ethnicity: 'our' reproductive community versus that of 'them'
- > Culture: extended human autopoiesis.

What all three dimensions have in common is that people relate to each other, but the reasons and goals, the process of spread and scope, as well as the imagined embellishments of these dimensions, are different (Mumm, 2018: 82). One can speak of the language community and culture even if no ethnic boundaries are involved, of culture even without linguistic and ethnic foundations. And although there are many points of contact, the terms would not obscure each other if they were so disentangled and would open up the opportunity for solid analysis (Mumm, 2018: 82).

Haarmann (1996: 223f.) describes ethnic identity using the question "What makes an X an X?" and differentiates between the given descent (ethnic specifics of the parents, grandparents, etc.) and the somewhat more variable cultural patterns, e.g., the social structure of the environment. The individual can freely choose his or her linguistic affiliation, general lifestyle, personal and professional relationships, and religious activities, thereby influencing and changing their identity (Haarmann, 1996: 226). Descent, contrastingly, is unchangeable and can at most be denied or repressed.

To sum up the statements:

- > *Ethnic identity* is a special kind of *social identity* (Hans-Bianchi, 2016)
- > *Ethnicity* should be equated with *cultural identity* (Schulze, 2010)
- > *Ethnicity* can be equated with *ethnic identity* (Mumm, 2018)

The language - here Kui - and the community of speakers - here the Kui - can therefore also be analyzed without necessarily having to define the ethnic boundaries. The stable features in an ethnic group are not the boundaries but rather the existence of mechanisms which maintain and regulate those and there seem to be no criteria that include someone in an ethnic group all members of the group must meet; however, it is required that some members meet all criteria and each member meets at least one criterion (Kontra et al., 2016: 227).⁹ One could add and reproduce them, which is one of the important reasons why minority education issues are so crucial and why there is so much opposition to schools using other L1s ('mother tongues') as educational media. Mother tongue-based education enables the group to continue as a group (Kontra et al., 2016: 227). Kontra et al. connect language (mother tongue) with ethnicity (ethnic group). As described, this is not the case

⁹ Often most members meet all criteria, but there are also some mediocre ethnic groups and self-haters ethnic groups who do not classify themselves as members even though they meet all criteria other than self-categorization and are classed as members by others (Kontra et al., 2016: 227).

for the Kui. Some of them mentioned Thai were their mother tongue, some answered Khmer or Lao as spoken in Northeastern Thailand. All of the participants were Kui by their admission. However, their L1 was not Kui in any case. Using Thai at school and university, made them not lose their Kui self-concept either.

5.2.2. Language, nationality, and identification with shared history and narrations

In the social sciences and linguistics, as well as in minority language policies, the *ethnolinguistic assumption*, the idea of "one nation, one language" is still used (Laakso et al., 2016: 10, 211, 226). Laakso et al. (2016: 10) clarify that this view produces a constructed ethnolinguistic identity and largely downplays or ignores the diversity in the everyday life of multilinguals. It is also about the question of the power that a (national) group has at its disposal. Indisputable, nationality does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about an individual's primary language nor about one's identification with a nation's self-image. Nationality and main language(s) no longer match as often as was possibly the case a hundred years ago (Lüdi, 1996: 321) when people did not move that much individually. In addition: Different realities of life generate different forms of multilingualism. And the language first acquired is not necessarily the language best mastered and also often not the language most used by the speaker (cf. Lüdi, 1996: 323). Straus and Höfer (1997: 296) go even further and, in addition to the meta-identities, also describe an identity core that, in their view, is produced in three ways: via biographical narratives, via the dominance of partial identities, and the generalization process along the four central modes of experience.

The Kui minority language is a language without its written language, which is why cultural knowledge is only passed on orally. Like many other social groups, the Kui have a rich treasure trove of stories, myths, and fairy tales that are passed orally to the next generation. The Kui thus possess a specific cultural capital belonging to their social group. In Thailand today, most Kui speakers are found in the north-eastern provinces of Surin and Sisaket. Many of them live in southern districts such as Amphoe Sikhoraphum (ศีขรภูมิ) and Amphoe Sangkha (สังขะ) in Surin, and Khu Khan and Amphoe Prang Ku (อำเภอปราณบุรี) in Sisaket. In the 1960s (most likely between 1960 and 1967), during a prolonged dry spell, many Kui speakers from the northern districts such as Amphoe Chom Phra (จอมพระ) and Amphoe Tha Tum (ท่าตูม) moved with their elephants to the southern part of the province closer to the Cambodia border. From there they also caught elephants in the Cambodian part of the Pre Vihear-Forest area. By documenting and publishing part of this cultural heritage collected through stories of Kui in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia comparability within the stories of the Kui from the three states of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia becomes achievable. Recorded and checked for similarities and deviations can be compared. Speakers did not only speak about myths but also about narrations remembering historical events such as a dry period:

"Yes, the year that Northeast Thailand got under the big hit of drought is not recorded properly. But I would guess that a few years after I was born. Most likely would be during the year 1960–1967. I still remember the drunk that continue to my early age that I have to wait for the water to come out in the well and collect the water for drinking for hours." (Original English quote from a Kui speaker on their current habitat, interview in English)

The construction of Kui identity includes participants' knowledge of traditional and contemporary Kui songs, myths, fairy tales, stories, and other specific Kui rituals and practices (Siebenhütter, 2020). It was shown, that older people know more about traditional rituals and practices. Most known stories relate to elephant hunting or other elephant rituals such as "elephant catching" (Jeang Chang) and reflect the close connection of the Kui to these mammals. Younger generations describe how the legends or stories were passed down orally from their grandparents. If this does not happen, the corresponding stories may be lost to posterity due to the lack of written tradition. It is less important if

the shared narratives are fully consistent with historical data. More important is the degree Kui share such a common belief and the extent to which practices and rituals based on these beliefs are shared. It is further possible to derive structural linguistic descriptions from such documented stories, myths and fairy tales. However, this was not part of this research. There is still a deficit here for the Kui language, which this paper cannot eliminate either. So far, purely oral traditions can be documented, which can contribute to the understanding of the identity development of the Kui in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos as a minority within majority societies. For the Kui in Surin and Sisaket areas investigated, it has already been possible to identify deviations from stories that differ from village to village. However, these were rather small and should be analyzed and compared in further research with Kui stories from Laos and Cambodia.

5.3. Language choice, shared practices and values among the Kui as identity-forming elements

While language competences allow speakers to differentiate from, include and exclude others from one's group-communication there are other instruments in group-behavior. For Kui's self-understanding, Lamont's differentiation of the "symbolic demarcation" into a *cultural*, a *moral*, and a *social demarcation* offers a way of understanding beyond linguistic demarcation. A feeling of inferiority - whether linguistic or on other levels - could not be determined. However, terms like "Isan" are perceived as derogatory by individual speakers. Further, the English spelling *Kui* was preferred over *Kuy* frequently used in literature. One older Kui explained this while an interview at a Kui festival in northern Surin province in February 2019. Another Kui collected a bilingual report (Thai and English) on Kui history where he used the spelling *Kui* as well. Though these aspects were not considered relevant enough to be understood as a devaluation of speaker's identity. Problematic stigmatization of linguistic or ethnic minorities depends largely on whether an individual feels that they belong to a group to such an extent that they can experience security and their basic needs for social inclusion and recognition are met. The size of their minority group, i.e., their own in-group, proved to be less important for the Kui. Some Kui see themselves as Thai, Khmer or Lao despite being Kui. They do not seem to need the language itself as a mainly delimiting and thus actively distancing identity-forming necessity. Or, seen from the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004 [1986]: 284)¹⁰ perspective, this might be understood as the striving to leave the unsatisfying existing group to join a more positive group, the Thai-group for the Kui.

Based on the analysis of this research, Kui-identity rather can be summarized as self-assessment and external evaluation, with the speakers being unaware of a large part of this identification and self-classification and observing it more than inquiring about it. Although the Kui self-concept is based on extralinguistic features such as shared practices and values besides language, they share practices and values

¹⁰ The evaluation of one's group is determined by reference to certain other groups or by social comparisons about value-related attributes and characteristics. Positive deviations in in-group and out-group comparisons lead to a high reputation. Negative deviations between in-group and out-group result in low prestige. From these assumptions, Tajfel and Turner (2004 [1986]: 284) derive three theoretical principles: (1) Individuals strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity. Such positive social identity is based in large part on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively different from the relevant out-groups. (2) When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals either strive to leave their existing group and join a more positive group and/or to change their existing group for the better. (3) Since humans can be understood as social beings, it can be concluded from what has been said that individuals build, maintain and further develop their identity and self-concept significantly on the reinsurance in the group and reflection and interaction with the group.

with the majority language representatives, the Thai. Not only in Thailand but throughout mainland Southeast Asia one finds an affinity for elephants, traditional dress, and certain Buddhist ceremonies among the majority as well as minority groups. In psychology, social identity choice is fueled by a necessary balance of in-group inclusion versus out-group differentiation (Tajfel and Turner (2004 [1986])). This describes the optimal distinctiveness theory, i.e., the theory of optimal differentiation/unmistakability of the individual. The social identity, therefore, depends significantly on which characteristics can be shared with the in-group and which characteristics emphasize the distinctiveness from the out-group. Social groups or categories and membership are associated with positive or negative value connotations. Hence, social identity can be positive or negative depending on evaluations (which tend to be socially consensual, either within or between groups) of those groups that contribute to an individual's social identity. An observer from the outside might conclude that the Kui - apart from the language, which is not used to the same extent in everyday life by everyone - can show only little of their own to identify with their group. There are many similarities the Kui share with the majority of society and other minorities in Southeast Asia. The Kui minority did not immigrate from a faraway place but has been in Thailand for decades and - as far as this can be proven by research - is located in mainland Southeast Asia constantly.

Personal identity was described as a large circle within which is a small circle (Fig. 5). The small circle feels quite at home in the larger one, because one is not completely alien to one other, even if the language differs. What was particularly emphasized in this study was the view of the Kui themselves. And as a result, besides the shared values and practices, the Kui have something else of their own that they emphasize in their self-assessment and which also makes them different from other groups (Thai, Lao, Khmer etc.) who can and want to delimit. What may seem similar or even the same to the outsider, such as general proximity to elephants, which are native to Southeast Asia, the Kui themselves can identify clear demarcations to other groups in Thailand or Cambodia and their specific relationship to these animals differs from that of other Southeast Asians and use this as a feature for in-group identification. It also becomes clear that minorities can share the values of the majority culture without having to sacrifice their minority culture.

Social spaces, writing, linguistic and language-independent rituals and practices shape the identitarian self-understanding of individuals and groups in addition to and in interaction with linguistic action. This self-image can only ever be understood as a process. So, like linguistic phenomena are subject to constant change, a LI - if it exists in this form - can only be understood as a phenomenon that is in flux.

The people of 'Pak Isan' generally refer to themselves as 'Lao', but for political reasons, they have to use the term 'Khon Isan' ('Man Isan') and what they speak as 'Phasa Isan' ('language Isan'), a female speaker at the University of Ubon Ratchathani reports. According to speakers and historical records in the province of Surin, the Kui originate in nowadays Cambodia why some designate themselves as Khmer (s. Siebenhütter, 2022).

5.4. Language does not necessarily function as a signal for identity

It was found, that Kui represent a large variety of language competencies and language usage in daily life. While some hardly ever spoke Kui, others used their heritage language most of the time. Similar things were found for the competencies the participants had in Kui besides other languages. While some were highly competent, others felt unsure about their language competencies and preferred to have their communication in Thai or Lao. These findings were also confirmed for participants with high self-identification as Kui. As a result, the Kui-language could not be linked to the Kui-identity and language did not automatically function as a signal for identity. Multilingualism in Kui society is usage-based, which means that it is neither a goal nor a necessity to

achieve “perfect competence” in all of the used languages that cover all areas of life. Low language competencies did not have a negative effect on self-concept of being Kui. This goes in line with Laakso et al. (2016):

“In reality, speech communities are often fragmented or dispersed and [...] seldom operate in only one language. In some language-based communities, a considerable share of the members does not fluently master the heritage language at issue anymore, although they may symbolically identify themselves with it.” (Laakso et al., 2016: 16–17)

Multilingualism among the Kui is highly situation-specific: The language use is different and varies in situations such as scientific topics at university and in educational contexts, interregional communication with people from other villages, in the home and family environment, and trade and contact in the regional environment. The language use is functional in certain situations but not each language is used in all contexts. Schulze (2009) describes such a situational functional language use for traditional societies in Southeast Caucasus where language one is used for family and local events, language two for inter-regional communication such as trade and market situations, language three for regional discourse and interregional communication and language four for public topics or political discourse (Schulze, 2009).

Kresić (2009: 57) describes language(s) as the basis for the construction of LI: “The flexibility and possible multiplicity of identity is substantially based on the inner linguistic and foreign-language, i.e. the multilingual, competences of individuals.” While this “Model of multiple linguistic identity” (Kresić, 2009) where “the multilingual competences and the multiple identities of the individual” Kresić (2009: 52) are central, this paper’s results show, that linguistic competencies might play a subordinate role in the identity construction process. Although, the decision to speak bilingually in an allochthonous multilingual situation may have an identitarian dimension, since it might contradict normative attitudes both of the society of origin and the host society (Lüdi, 1996; Gumperz, 1982). Language is not necessarily linked to identity, nor is it automatically linked to ethnicity. As a result, language does not necessarily function as an element that creates identity, even more in an autochthonous multilingual setting. There are examples from other regions. Schulze (2009) explains that the identity of members of classical East Caucasian (small) societies is not determined by language but by other factors, for example, the following (Schulze, 2009):

- > Clan (with the option of adapting foreign-language people as well)
- > mythological ancestors
- > Specifics of material culture (crafts, etc.)
- > Topographical specifics
- > Sociological specifics

This list is not complete; however, it should be evidence of the fact that language does not necessarily carry identity signals. We can find the same in Kui society whose members are identifying more with shared historical narratives, practices and handicrafts (e.g., bark processing and fabric production) than with the Kui language. Some of the individuals calling themselves Kui were found to have little competence in Kui language use (see Siebenhütter, 2020, 2022). Also, the name of a language may be not related to group identity (see Schulze, 2009 on Tabasaran). This is often the case when several language names are used as is the case for the *Kui* which is also known as *Cuoï*, *Khamen-Boran*, *Kuy*, *Kui Souei*, *Kuoy*, *Kuuy*, *Soai*, *Suai*, *Suay*, *Suei*, *Sui*, and *Suoi*.

5.5. Defining linguistic identity and the relationship between language and identity

Taking socio-psychological aspects into account, the identity development of the Kui and in particular the role of multilingualism in the process of identity construction was analyzed. To give a final definition of the concept of “identity” concerning multilingualism it can be stated,

what identity is not:

- Identity is not the same as social role
- Identity is not the same as code
- Identity is not the same as language competence
- Ethnicity is not necessarily related to self-concept
- Nationality and “national language” as well as the L1 language(s) (“mother tongue”) do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about identity
- Language does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about identity, language is not necessarily a marker for group identification
- Identity is formed by individuals, not collectively by groups
- Multilingual language is not well described with *multilingual identity*

Although the Kui can be described as members of a group due to certain ethnic and linguistic similarities, each forms their own identity. Therefore, “it can dangerously simplify the complicated reality, as it suggests a homogeneous group with a collective identity, a socio-geographic unity or concentration and a link between each group and its language (the ‘ethnolinguistic assumption’)” (Laakso et al., 2016: 16). Identity is to be understood as singular rather than plural. When living conditions change, parts of the identity or self-concept may change, but the identity itself remains stable (Dörfler et al., 2018: 185). Some publications, therefore, used to speak of “identities” or “partial identities” (Keupp et al., 1999), in others identity in the plural only appears to describe pathological characteristics (Dörfler et al., 2018: 578). This paper tried to visualize, that *multilingual language use* of individuals is not well described with *multilingual identity*. The term multilingual identity does not bring further insights into the phenomenon of multilingualism. It would be therefore enough to speak of the *multilingual profile* of an individual. Identity in the sense of self-concept includes more than only language competencies and language use. Consequently, identity is not to be equated with a social role – only a part of the entire identity is required or shown in the respective role. In psychology, this existence of partial identities while maintaining the same identity is referred to as social coherence (Dörfler et al., 2018: 541). It is important to distinguish whether a characteristic behavior is only due to the role currently being performed, or whether it is part of the human identity (Dörfler et al., 2018: 700). The social role can include also language use and the identity may be influenced by the role and by the language use. If the languages an individual uses over a certain period of life also influence his/her identity continuously and sustainably is related to many other factors as well.

Linguists have criticized the previous disdain for or omission of language in identity research approaches (e.g., Kresić, 2007). This is certainly a valid criticism to consider in further research on identity. But, as could be shown in this paper, the small-scale differentiation in individual identities (linguistic, professional, athletic, mother, father, employer, etc.) leads back to social roles and emphasizes individual skills aiming to equate them with identity. This way - hopefully, this paper has been clearly shown - is not expedient, neither for linguistics nor for other disciplines dealing with identity research. It was shown that it makes more sense to see the concept of identity in less detail and not to immediately interpret every social role and every ability and competence of individuals as their identity.

The results may contribute to the development of a *language-dependent identity construction model* by receiving evidence from empirical sociolinguistic data collected from Kui speakers in Northeastern Thailand. Finally, it should be stressed that Identity is not the same as language and multilingualism research would rather profit from understanding identity as a *language-dependent*, but not as a *language-only* concept. Rather, language can be described as an additive component that can enrich an identity. It might therefore make more sense to speak of a “linguistic profile” that more or less affects identity and helps shape it.

5.6. Limitations

This paper cannot cover all features that may be relevant for identification and self-concept. These are extralinguistic features such as fabrics, jewelry and other objects. Clothing and jewelry, colors and patterns like certain festivities and rituals are frequently mentioned as identity-forming features. It should be emphasized - as Laakso et al. (2016) explain it - not to explicitly show only this pejorative “folkloric” form of minority identity. Smaller languages and the languages of minorities have often been conceptualized as traditional collectivities, studies of folklore, song, costume and ancient ways of subsistence have dominated the field (Laakso et al., 2016: 198). But, as certainly other (smaller) groups, the Kui are modern as well. Similar findings were reported about Finno-Ugric language minorities: As diverse as they are, all were modern and part of global macrostructures, and are also dependent on global economies and at the same time subject to global political and cultural processes (Laakso et al., 2016: 198). If the Kui enter into rituals and specific dress for festivals, they do it consciously. Despite their bond to traditions, they precisely decide which elements they would like to have with them in their everyday life and which they reserve for rituals and specific situations only.

Another limitation exists concerning the representation of minorities in the media and the need to overcome the “folkloristic bias” may be relevant for identity related questions. The consideration of folkloristic elements such as textiles, costumes and rituals are certainly important for self-identification of individuals and often connected to language use and linguistic behavior. Although these features cannot be covered in this paper, it should be mentioned. Research needs to overcome the “folkloristic” tendency (cf. Laakso et al., 2016: 198). To gain insights into the self-concept and identity of individuals, in particular, they should not be the only characteristics reported about a minority, but often that is the case.¹¹ Kui’s living environment constitutes far more than the traditional practices and traditional clothing presented in this section. Even if traditions may have identity-forming functions for some Kui, as a whole they should by no means be reduced to these outwardly visible features, especially since the Kui’s majority is usually to be found in T-shirts and cargo pants or jeans anyway. Despite this, reporting on clothing and festivals often contribute to cementing the stereotypical image of minorities that is still predominantly shown and transported in the media (cf. Laakso et al., 2016: 215). Especially the younger representatives cannot necessarily be measured against this stereotype, but identify with Kui and understand themselves as Kui concerning identity. Media representations and public images of minorities need to be updated: Both minority and majority media should emphasize the role of smaller groups as an integral part of the local ethnocultural landscape and avoid reproducing the extinction narrative depicting minority languages and cultures as something that belong to the past and will inevitably die out (Laakso et al., 2016: 215).¹² The younger generation under 30 in particular is not necessarily interested in participating in traditional practices, but without having to reject the Kui identity at the same time.

¹¹ An equal society must be based on a language ideology and practice that encourages people to preserve and develop their languages, as well as their cultures, histories and livelihoods, rather than promoting a uniformity that only reflects the dominant language, culture and history (Laakso et al., 2016: 198).

¹² Rather than focusing on elements of otherness, traditional culture and folklore, and reproducing stereotypical images, mainstream media should make explicit efforts to reflect real-life experiences and concerns of minorities (Laakso et al., 2016: 215).

6. Conclusion

6.1. The linguistic profile, and its influence on multilinguals self-concept

This paper analyzed the concept of linguistic identity (LI) among the multilingual Kui exemplarily for multilinguals in general. Considering the research of other disciplines (sociology, psychology, philosophy and social psychology) besides linguistic viewpoints, the findings provide a guideline to the research of identity based on empirical sociolinguistic data collected from multilingual speakers. It was argued, how terminological confusion of “core personality”, “personal core,” “self-conception”, “multifaceted nature of language identity”, or “partial, fluid, hybrid and multiple identities” (e.g., Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos, 2023; Kresić, 2006, 2007; Kuo, 2009; Laakso et al., 2016; Leimgruber et al., 2022) results from equating *identity* with *social roles* or *language* (Siebenhütter, 2022: 264). Equating language and identity further leads researchers to propose “L1 and L2 identity separation” or even “identity erasure” (Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos, 2023) although research gave evidence that adding L2 or L3/L4 does not lead to a split personality, ‘linguistic schizophrenia’ (Pavlenko, 2006: 3). Bilinguals explaining to have “definitely two different ways of being me” (Pavlenko, 2006: 24), are likely referring to their perception of themselves under certain conditions or in different (social) contexts (social roles). However, *identity* is constructed by more than by language(s) an individual is proficient in and sometimes as the findings of this study suggest the concept of identity is to define even without language. Therefore, even excellent L2 acquisition cannot lead to “identity erasure” or partial (linguistic) identities. Analogous to intelligence research, which increasingly got lost in the designation of individual intelligence (multiple intelligence models), identity research also seems to be creating ever-new sub-forms of identity. With this ever-finer subdivision into personal, political, linguistic, ethnic, national, social, etc. identity, it must be remembered that the terminology is less and less self-explanatory and thus ultimately does not bring any knowledge gain compared to the pure use of the term identity (without addition). It hopefully could be shown that multilingualism in the sense of several languages (active and passive competence) does not result in a multiple identity and that the finding that identity, which is more or less stable over the lifespan, can be supplemented by different language competences that interact with of one’s own identity as well as various leisure activities and professional activities

$$Language_1 + Language_2 + Language_3 + Language_n = multiple\ Language$$

$$Identity_1 + Identity_2 + Identity_3 + Identity_n = multiple\ Identity$$

Identity is certainly not the same as language whether you call it code or language or linguistic competence. Rather, language can be described as an additive component that can enrich an identity. This result in the following simple formula for describing multilingualism and identity: An identity that can include two and up to a whole range of languages with different levels of competence and at different times of acquisition, for example with two first (L) and any number of other languages (S)¹³:

$$Identity + L_{1a} + L_{1b} + S_1 + S_2 + S_n \dots$$

These manifestations of multilingualism can be as diverse as research on bilingualism and multilingualism describes: from bilingual from birth, with a high level of competence in both languages or even a first language L1 and other languages S1 added in the course of youth and

¹³ “L” denotes the first language in relation to the time of language acquisition, i.e., from birth, while “S” stands for other languages acquired later. The presentation is thus based on the distinction that is customary in linguistics between S1, S2, etc. and first language (L1), second language (L2), etc., which can each be mastered with different levels of competence (Riehl, 2013: 390f.).

adult life, S2, S3 and so on, which are used actively and/or passively, in writing and/or purely orally, depending on private and professional use. The identity of an individual is there, and through linguistic contacts, the human being is also influenced to a certain extent in his “being” and “acting”, but his identity is not decisively passive through the language (s) he/she is using understands or actively speaks and applies in everyday life, changes. Likewise, language cannot be completely separated from identity and, like physical form, is one of the characteristics of a human being that can be modified within certain limits, but can never be completely separated from the identity, from the self of an individual, why that “+” symbol in the sense of “and” in the formula above should only be understood as an approximation. As a result, language is not necessarily linked to identification and consequently to identity, nor is it automatically linked to ethnicity. As a result, language does not obligatorily function as an element that creates identity.

6.2. Linguistic identity should be rather linguistic profile

Inevitably, the social environment and living conditions influence the individual and respective development; however, an individual hardly acquires a new identity with every new language they learn – in the sense of an additive process (“multiple identity”), nor does the added language(s) lead to “identity erasure”. Language is therefore to be understood as a feature of identity and certainly not to be equated with identity. It might increase clarity to speak of a “linguistic profile” that more or less affects identity and helps shape it. It was asked if previous approaches and models to describe *linguistic identity* (LI) are purposeful. The aim of this paper was not only to describe some theoretical aspects of the modelling of linguistic identity but also to provide a standardized methodology that can be used to capture what was identified as a *linguistic identity*. It was elaborated as expedient to consider the following factors for the determination of LI or better the share of language in the development of an individual self-concept: (1) The concept of the mother tongue, (2) Linguistic competencies and preferences, (3) Language choice and language use in daily life and language contact situations, (4) Importance of languages from a speakers perspective and language awareness, (5) Salient linguistic and language external social interaction and communication in groups and across groups and (6) emotional bonds to a language or a language community. Altogether, it was found to be helpful to include language in research on self-concept and identity as it is highly likely that the linguistic profile of an individual influences his/her identity or self-concept. However, it was also shown, that LI as a concept is less helpful and especially not conducive to cross-regional comparison. Identity, i.e., the self-concept, is formed individually, why terminology “linguistic identity” LI would be to redefine individually for each case and should not be used lightly. This would have the advantage that it would be clear for the respective study what exactly is meant by the term identity. However, the disadvantage of such an approach would be that it makes comparability difficult. Identity does not have to be broken down into individual phenomena such as linguistic, athletic, and professional skills and preferences, although all of these skills and characteristics of individuals can affect their self-image (their identity). I would rather see the investigation of forms of expression and interactions that appear in connection with multilingualism and which can be directly empirically investigated without getting lost in definitional confusion, even more, expedient than a further elaboration of terminology. The focus of future research should therefore lie on manifestations and interactions in multilingualism. This can be for example multilingualism and emotional attachment to language(s) and other phenomena that appear in connection with multilingualism which makes a promising linguistic field at the interface to sociology, psychology and intercultural communication.

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Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Abbreviations

Auth. Emph Authors emphasize
Auth. Transl Authors Translation
Emph. i. O. Emphasis in original
LI Linguistic Identity

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