

Chapter 2: Becoming a Chameleon

I find linguistic and cultural identity to be an intriguing aspect of foreign language acquisition and cultural adaptation. During that year in Colombia, my experiences caused me to closely observe my own and other people's linguistic and cultural identities as I traveled the world and learned new languages. We have a kaleidoscope of identities—including social, national, racial, ethnic, gender, and religious identities—which may fade in the background or come to the forefront depending on the social interaction at a given moment. Linguistic and cultural identity can be understood in simple terms as identifying with or feeling part of the community that speaks the language in question, whether it is your mother tongue or an additional language. You talk and act like other members of the community, and it feels natural to do so.

It is possible to develop multiple linguistic and cultural identities throughout our lifetime. Some people are born into and raised in multilingual and multicultural families and/or communities. Even in such situations, there can be significant differences among individuals in developing proficiency in the languages spoken at home and/or in the community and adopting diverse cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity, so the degree to which one develops linguistic competence affects the strength of cultural identity. Children of immigrants who speak their heritage language experience their heritage culture much more in their daily lives than children who don't speak their heritage language.

The loss of heritage language among immigrant children sometimes leads to an inability of the parents to socialize with their children, family disunity, and even domestic violence. When parents do not help their offspring learn their heritage language, the children may lose the opportunity to learn that language in a natural setting and even their ethnic identities. Conversely, studies related to the maintenance of heritage languages show positive correlations between language maintenance and the construction of ethnic identities, personal-psychological development, higher self-esteem, and confidence.

I remember being shocked at an Association of International Business Conference by a presentation from an American academic of Chinese ethnicity who did a psychological investigation involving ethnic Chinese in the US. She never asked the subjects in the study if they spoke Chinese! She simply treated them all the same in trying to show how their cultural background affects their perception. I mentioned this during the question-and-answer session. Afterward, an audience member came up to me and commented that since she did not consider proficiency in the heritage language, her research approach seemed like racial stereotyping equivalent to racial profiling condemned in the US.

For the last thirty years, I have been a cross-cultural management professor in Japan. My research has focused on the psychological and attitudinal factors that affect foreign language acquisition and cultural adaptation. Indisputably, linguistic and cultural identity is the most critical factor in determining how well a foreign language learner imitates people who speak the target language as their mother tongue regarding their accent, prosody, speech habits, and body language. I previously mentioned that my other linguistic and cultural identities only affect my native tongue when I am not attentive or not trying to prevent it. This reminds me of a research paper written on this subject

by Nicole Marx. I want to talk about what she wrote concerning her personal experiences because they reflect, in many ways, my own experiences during my language learning journey.

As a Canadian whose mother tongue is English, she explores the construction of her German linguistic and cultural identity during a three-year sojourn in Germany. At first, she tried to keep people from thinking that she was American from her accent when she spoke German. She still couldn't imitate local German speakers well enough to do so, and with previous experience learning French, she spoke German with traces of a French accent. The fact that French students were more readily accepted than Americans by the locals was one motivating factor.

As she began to copy her local counterparts in non-linguistic forms—such as their dress style and social behavior—she progressed in developing a more native-like German accent. As Shakespeare said, “All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.” Later, I would like to discuss the relationship between acting and successfully functioning in foreign languages and cultures.

She started to imitate aspects of the regional German dialect and accent of where she spent most of her time and those of the places she visited. During this process, she experienced a significant influence on how she spoke and wrote in her native English. In brief interactions with locals, she played the game of trying to create the impression that German was her mother tongue.

After reaching a high level of German proficiency and with more success in creating the impression of being a native speaker, she returned to Canada. For the initial three months, her accent in English was not only affected by her German but also by her impression of a British accent. She often sought to mimic a British accent while teaching English in Germany since this was the preferred accent among her students. One important reason for the foreign accent in her native English was the desire to express that her experiences and ability in foreign languages had transformed her. She was no longer the same as monolingual Canadian speakers of English.

In brief interactions with locals in foreign languages, I have also challenged myself to pass as a native speaker. However, due to my physical appearance, it is impossible in Asian countries except over the phone. Additionally, I have consciously and unconsciously imitated regional accents and dialects. Like Nicole, I sometimes allow my other linguistic and cultural identities to affect my accent in English to differentiate between monolingual English speakers and myself.

It is difficult for me not to be influenced by accents and speech habits, even if our conversation is in English. It is much easier to approximate my original American English accent when interacting with people who have a similar accent due to the chameleon effect. Also called unintentional mirroring, this effect refers to the subconscious imitation of body posture, hand gestures, facial expressions, accents, word choice, and other behaviors. This type of mimicry enhances emotional connections between individuals and increases the amiability and smoothness of social interactions. It is not the same as mimicry used for ridicule.

Everyone experiences the chameleon effect to a certain extent in language and behavior, some people more than others. The degree to which they do so is related to empathy and emotional sensitivity. Highly empathic individuals exhibit the effect to a greater extent than do other people.

Additionally, people who frequently adopt the perspective of interaction partners mimic their communication habits to a greater degree than people who adopt the perspective of others less often. The chameleon effect is a natural human response to the need for adaptation and the desire to belong to social groups and connect with fellow human beings.

I often imagine what it's like to be someone I see in daily life. It's like a game for me. I am curious about how people experience their world. This trait relates to my willingness and ability to become part of new linguistic and cultural communities. The more I identify with native speakers of the language I am learning, the easier it is to mimic their accent and body language. This identification is a form of empathy. The concepts of identity and empathy are closely related. Think of the phrase *put yourself in their shoes*, which we could also substitute with *have empathy*, *feel what they feel*, or *identify with them*. When I am comfortable mimicking body language, it is easier to imitate the accent.

Thus, I believe that the intentional acquisition of foreign languages and adaptation to foreign cultures tend to increase the potential of the chameleon effect both in verbal and non-verbal forms. This is part of the transformational process of becoming multilingual and multicultural individuals: constructing new linguistic and cultural identities. The more one speaks a foreign language spontaneously with ever greater mimicking of a native speaker, the more transformational the process and overcoming the emotional resistance to creating new cultural and linguistic identities.

You might wonder what I mean by *emotional resistance*. The following anecdote might be elucidating. Among the foreigners who often appear on TV in Japan in the role of *gaikokujin* (foreign) commentators, the ones considered to be the most fluent in Japanese closely mimic the accent, body language, and way of reacting of the Japanese commentators. By *way of reacting*, I mean doing things like noisily sucking in air and then groaning slightly before disagreeing with someone. Dave Spector is one of the best examples. I once discussed these thoughts with a foreigner who had been living in Japan for thirteen years but still had minimal ability in Japanese. When I mentioned the example of Spector imitating Japanese ways of communication, he reacted with indignation saying, "Doesn't it make you want to just slap him?"