

***Social identity and social networks as crucial factors  
in Second Language Acquisition:  
the case of Polish immigrants in Wales***

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**Abstract**

In today's world, human migration has become so common that it has started creating a very interesting phenomenon, not only with respect to social interactions and cross-cultural encounters between people from around the world, but also with respect to Second Language Acquisition. Acquiring a new language in the so-called 'naturalistic context' comprises a variety of factors that makes it a completely different experience in comparison with often artificial, classroom learning of a given language. This paper discusses influences that the social identity and social networks created by Polish immigrants in L2 speech environments have on the effectiveness of their English language acquisition. The article contributes to existing literature treating this aspect of immigrant English, and offers ideas for further research on the subject.

**Introduction**

The issue of immigration has been an intriguing social phenomenon throughout history. Nowadays cross-cultural contacts between people of different backgrounds have become much more frequent as English has become the language of communication worldwide. There are plenty of factors

related to migration movements and these may influence the existence of an individual or a group within the new community. Among the obstacles that migrants face when entering a foreign country, language is one which crucially affects the quality of life within the new community. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that takes place in a naturalistic context creates first-hand experience of both the language and the culture characteristic for a given community in new social context. The notion 'naturalistic context' is related to the process of acquiring the language in its natural environment within the surroundings of the second language speech community. The aim of the article is to describe the results of the exploratory study on the influence of social networks on the process of English language learning by Polish immigrants in Wales. This way the paper attempts to shed some light on the issue of immigrants' profile by discussing the possible relations between their overall sense of belonging to a particular community and their second language development. The pilot study presented in the article, conducted on the group of Polish immigrants to Wales, shows the explanatory potential of research in the field of studies on relations between language and social factors.

## Social Identity

The notion of identity is a very broad concept, and has been given significant attention across the social sciences and humanities. Academics have analysed identity from different perspectives through research within numerous scientific disciplines such as psychology (e.g. Kenrick et. al 1999, Aronson et al. 1994, Zimbardo et al. 2009), sociology (e.g. Budyta-Budzyńska 2013, Giddens 2001), anthropology (e.g. Kłoskowska 2005, Nowicka 2009, Duranti 2009), and culture studies (e.g. Barker 2003).

According to E. Erikson, who has significantly contributed to the research on identity in the context of the personality development, identity "connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (1980: 109). Erikson identified and described two aspects of identity: competence and integrity. Competence refers to the social status and professional characteristics, whereas integrity is the state of mind, but one which requires various systems of social interactions (e.g. ethnic ties, religions, political affiliations) to operate effectively (Hoover 1997). These two aspects of identity have formed operational benchmarks for the analysis of human behaviour.

The subject literature refers to two types/ levels of identity, i.e. personal and social (individual vs. collective) identity, with the latter divided into national/ethnic, cultural or socio-cultural identities (e.g. Kenrick et. al 1999,

Budyta-Budzyńska 2013). For the purpose of studies within which ‘identity’ requires to be mapped and defined, scientists use one of these concepts or combine them to analyse a particular aspect of identity. Personal identity (self-identity) refers to idiosyncratic qualities that make a person unique, and is defined as “a person’s essential, continuous self [which is] the internal, subjective concept of oneself as an individual” (Reber 1995: 355). Thus, social identity can be perceived as a social version of identity through which an individual defines its position in social practice, depending on the collection of group memberships. The social attitude to identity situates the reflexive self within a certain kind of social context, so that identity is described through the set of beliefs and emotions directed towards the group/groups which the individual belongs to (Kenrick et. al 1999: 566).

Identity theory (possessing sociological background) and social identity theory (deriving from psychology) address the structure and function of the self, as well as acknowledge reciprocal links between society and the socially construed self. Although these theories differ in their approaches to socio-cognitive processes connected with identity-related behaviour patterns (Hogg et. al 1995), they significantly overlap and both emphasize that the multifaced and dynamic self actively mediates its place within social structure through its individual behaviour (Stets and Burke 2000). Identity theory was originally formulated by S. Stryker (e.g. Stryker 1968, 1980, 1987) and it refers to the symbolic interactionist view that perceives the self as a product of social interaction. Social identity theory, elaborated by H. Tajfel in relation to social perceptions of racism, prejudice and discrimination, draws on the social self, group processes and intergroup relations. It was then supplemented by J.C. Turner and others (e.g. Tajfel 1959, 1969, Tajfel 1974, Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Since the individual negotiates his/her identity with society in relation to a broad spectrum of social variables, identity emerges from the dialectics between the individual and society, and is perceived as an unstable and changeable phenomenon. In consequence, theories concerning the process of identity negotiation:

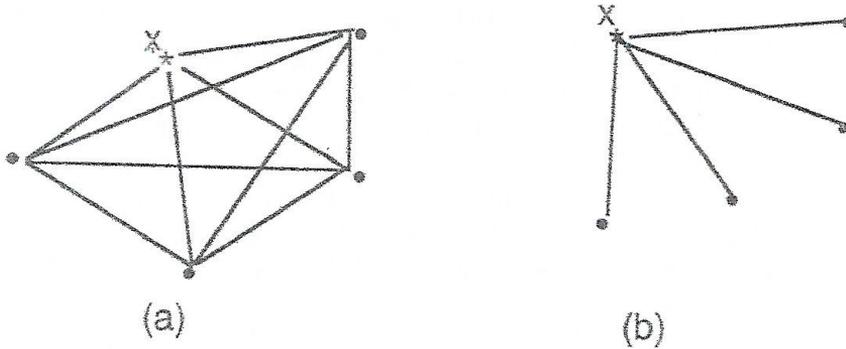
are always embedded in a more general interpretation of reality; they are ‘built into’ the symbolic universe and its theoretical legitimations, and vary with the character of the latter. Identity remains unintelligible unless it is located in a world. Any theorizing about identity – and about specific identity types – must therefore occur within the framework of the theoretical interpretations within which it and they are located (Berger and Luckmann 1996: 195).

One of the factors that influences individual's social identity is the fact of his/her belonging to certain social networks, something which has yet to be satisfactorily accounted for.

## Social Networks

The concept of social network has been given significant attention across the social sciences in the context of research on individual, mainly informal relationships between people. It has also been widely applied in linguistics within linguistic variation studies to examine the relation between the individual's social interactions and specific language spoken by the person in question. The term 'social network' is defined as a social structure created by a set of social actors (individuals or organizations), sets of dyadic ties, and other types of social interactions between social actors (Wasserman and Faust 1994). Similarly, according to Lesley Milroy, "...social network' refers quite simply to the informal social relationships contracted by an individual" (1980: 174). The concept of social network is applied by sociologists to analyse relationships established within groups referred to as community's primary groups, which are, e.g.: family, friends, neighbours or school/work mates, whereas sociolinguists use the social network theory to reveal the extent to which an individual's personal network structure can explain this person's linguistic behaviour. A fundamental postulate of the social network theory is that people create personal communities whose role is to provide a meaningful support for solving the problems of daily life (Mitchell 1986). Thus, the social network perspective provides theoretical framework for analysing the structure of social groups for explaining the patterns observed in these structures, including those connected with the language.

The crucial aspect of social network is a feature defined as 'density'. L. Milroy describes density in the following way: "A network is said to be relatively dense if a large number of the persons to whom ego is linked are also linked to each other" (1980: 50), which means – providing that the individual is considered to be the core of his/her network and to have informal relationships with the members of the network – the more interconnections within the network, the higher density it has. On the other hand, in low density networks, the individual builds relationships with certain number of people but they themselves do not have connections with each other (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** High density (a) and low-density (b) social networks structures, where X is the focal point of the network. (Source: Türker 1995, adapted from Milroy 1980: 20).

The high-density type of social network is supposed to affect more the core person's language use and competence due to the fact that members of such social network, who know each other, use the same language and preserve language features typical for the specific variation of the language.

In the studies linking social networks and language change, the important property is the issue of weak ties. The idea was introduced to the field of sociology by P. Granovetter (1973), and later it was borrowed into linguistics. According to Granovetter,

weak interpersonal ties were necessary for the spread of changes within a network, because they form “bridges” between points in a network that otherwise would be connected only by longer paths of transmission. He claimed that individuals with many weak ties are in the best position to facilitate diffusion, and that they can serve to link members of different groups, allowing changes to be spread. This research also suggested that networks with dense, strong ties result in local cohesion within small groups, but lead to fragmentation in the larger structure (Clem 2016).

An equally important idea about the significant role of social status and position within a network had appeared in linguistics also in other studies, e.g. Labov's (1973) work on Black Vernacular English. However, the perspective of network structure pioneered by Granovetter (1973) was only adopted explicitly into the field of linguistics by the work of J. Milroy and M. Milroy (1985) who stated that the importance of weak ties could be extended to linguistic change and could serve the purpose of analysing the spread of specific linguistic variants in a community.

A crucial input to the field was elaborated by P. Eckert (2000), who analysed the social dynamics of language change among adolescents. As she said,

certain aspects of linguistic style are also negotiated consciously. I can recall explicit discussions in my own high school crowd of ‘cool’ ways to say things, generally in the form of imitations of cool people. . . . But in general, linguistic influence takes place without explicit comment and all the more requires direct access to speakers. The adoption of a way of speaking, like a way of dressing, no doubt requires both access and entitlement to adopt the style of a particular group (2000: 211).

Eckert described very general social mechanisms that operate in close-knit networks. By these mechanisms local conventions and norms, e.g. concerning dress, religion, or general behaviour including linguistic norms, are negotiated and created.

Although the social network theory has been applied by variationists quite extensively over the last two decades, this approach to examining language variations was often criticised, mainly because of two reasons: the lack of canonical „real” procedure for analysing social networks and the fact that personal network structure is definitely not independent of many complex properties that interact (i.e. broader social, political or economic frameworks) and which may affect individual’s language behaviour in numerous ways (Milroy 2004, Clem 2016). Thus, language variation analysts have to be aware of methodological constraints of this type of research and refer to social networks as only one of several factors affecting acquisition of the specific variant of a language. A deterministic view of language change as relying only on social network structure would be definitely a vast oversimplification due to the inherent complexity of social networks and interactions. Undoubtedly, the role of network structure compared to other social and linguistic factors connected with language change is still not well understood and needs further examination to cast some light on this complex issue.

### **The review of existing literature**

Over the last half century or so, linguists, sociolinguists and anthropologists have employed Social Network Theory to reveal the relation between social factors and language change. One of the pioneering studies in the field was a detailed investigation done by E. Bott (1957) who examined London families. In 1971, the qualitative network analysis of language use in various communities was conducted by J. J. Gumperz, and in 1973, the research on working- and middle-class Edinburgh families – by T. Cubitt. In 1979, S. Gal did a significant study on language shift from Hungarian to German in Hungarian peasants who lived in a small Austrian village. Another researcher who deserves to be mentioned here is S.M. Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) who ex-

amined a migrant group in Brasil. She observed the process of moving away from migrants' stigmatized rural dialect as a result of contact with urban society. L. Milroy (1987) conducted long-term study on the characteristics of particular linguistics variables spoken by different social and cultural groups in Belfast. In 1993, Türker used the Social Network theory to analyse the Norwegian influence on the Turkish language spoken by second generation immigrant Turks living in Norway. More recent studies concerning the relation between the social network structure and the language change are the ones conducted by D. Chakrabarti et al. (2004), Z. Fagyal et al. (2010), as well as J. Kirby and M. Sonderegger (2013) among many others.

## The investigation

### Participants of the research survey

The study was conducted among twenty Polish-born adult immigrants residing in Welshpool. They came to Wales at different ages and for various reasons. All of the twenty participants in the study came to Great Britain as English language beginners. What is particularly interesting is that most of them had known each other before coming to Wales, as they came from the same place: a small town called **Żychlin** in **Łódź** voivodeship. At the moment of making recordings, they were all creating a close community living practically next door to each other. Participants were approached through a network of family and friends of the researchers. The language level of participants was assessed by means of selected descriptors based on The Common European Framework of Reference for languages. Seventeen participants were on level A1 (beginner) and three of them – on level B1 (intermediate).

### Data collection procedure

The qualitative data were collected by means of structured interviews based on the questionnaire (see: Appendix) containing both closed and open-ended questions. The participants were asked 22 questions covering such issues as previous language experience, motivation for L2 learning and using that language, attitude towards L2 speech community and the language itself, amount of L1 and L2 used in everyday life situations or their plans for the near future. All of the questions were given in English and participants were asked to read out each question aloud and answer them in the second language. Speakers' answers were analysed with respect to their overall L2 experience, social identity and social networks they have created and sustained.

## Survey research results

The exhaustive overall analysis of the survey results exceeds the space limitations of an article. Therefore, for the needs of this article, we decided to present answers to selected questions only. We selected the four questions that directly referred to the issue of social identification and social networks (readiness to socialising with English native speakers) as well as the effectiveness in improving English language skills. These are the following questions in the questionnaire:

**Number 11:** Do you speak more Polish or English in everyday life situations?

**Number 19:** What do you think about English itself? Do you like the language, its melody etc.?

**Number 17:** How important it is for you to be recognized as a person of Polish origin?

**Number 20:** Do you like spending your free time with British people or do you prefer to have contact with your Polish friends? Do you take an active part in your community's social life?

Answers to the selected questions were manually coded in the process of labelling, to identify common themes and to receive quantifiable information.<sup>1</sup> Each interviewee was attributed an index number (from 1 to 20) to reveal the possible correlation between their answers to questions concerning social networking and social identity with those referring to effectiveness in improving English language skills. Below, we present the analysis results in the tables together with the most illustrative examples of justifications (quotations from the interviews).

### Survey research results: answers to the questions concerning effectiveness in improving English language skills

The analysis of the structured interviews allowed to define the below presented labels for responses to the questions 11 and 19. As it was already mentioned above, to make the results more clear we used the method of hierarchical coding.

Question 11: Do you speak more Polish or English in everyday life situations?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on coding see Babbie 2005, Elliott 2018, and Flick 2012, among many others.

Label	Index of the interviewee	Number of responses with the given theme	Examples of justification
more Polish	1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20	14	"I use Polish at work, I live with my Polish husband and I want to come back to Poland one day." / "I speak Polish at work, I have Polish girlfriend and shops – all I need." / "I don't need much English to do shopping." / "I meet mainly with other Polish immigrants." / "I work in a factory which employs mostly Poles."
more English	5,16	2	"I speak English whenever I can." / "I speak mainly English at work."
both Polish and English	3,4,17,18	4	"I have regular contacts with Polish people living nearby but I try to speak English at work." / "I speak English at work but I speak Polish to my Polish friends."

Question 19: What do you think about English itself? Do you like the language, its melody etc.?

Label	Index of the interviewee	Number of responses with the given theme	Examples of justification
I don't like English	1, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 20	8	"I don't see any need to learn English." / "I just want to be understood." / "I don't need to learn English." / "I just want to earn money and come back to Poland." /
I like English	3, 4, 5, 16, 17, 18	6	"I learn a lot through daily interactions." / "I like English and I'm getting better and better." / "I'm keen on speaking English."
I have no opinion	2, 7, 8, 13, 14, 19	6	"I try to speak but I have no one to speak to, I'd like to speak better." / "I don't speak well and I have a strange accent but I don't care." / "I don't need to learn because I'm surrounded by Polish community."

## Survey research results: answers to the questions concerning social networking and social identity

The analysis of responses to the questions 17 and 20.

Question 17: How important it is for you to be recognized as a person of Polish origin?

Label	Index of the interviewee	Number of responses with the given theme	Examples of justification
very important	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20	14	"I'm proud to be Polish." / "I value my Polish origins." / "I feel strong connections with Poland." / "I want to know what's happening in my country." / "I'm here only to save money and come back to Poland." / "I'm in touch with my close family in Poland." /
not important	–	0	–
I have no opinion	5, 10, 11, 16	4	"Sometimes I feel more Polish, sometimes less, it depends on the situation." / "I like it here, I earn a lot but I may come back to Poland one day."

Question 20: Do you like spending your free time with British people or do you prefer to have contact with your Polish friends? Do you take an active part in your community's social life?

Label	Index of the interviewee	Number of responses with the given theme	Examples of justification
I prefer Polish friends	1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20	14	"I feel more confident among Polish friends." / "It's easier to talk to Poles." / "My Polish friends always help me." / "I don't feel a stranger because I live in a community of Polish people." / "My neighbourhood consists mostly of Polish immigrants from my town in Poland, I know them, they give me a sense of safety." / "I only talk with other Poles with whom I work or who live nearby."

I prefer British people	5, 16	2	"I like this place and people around me." / "I socialise with Brits because I like speaking English."
I appreciate both – Polish friends and British people	3, 4, 17, 18	4	"I don't avoid contacts with British people." / "I try to meet both Brits and Poles."

The research results presented above show correlation between social factors and effectiveness in improving a foreign language skills. The influence of social identity and social networks on SLA in the cases of the described participants are discussed collectively in the next section.

### Concluding remarks

The analysis allowed researchers to reflect on informal social mechanisms that support the acquisition of a foreign language by the particular social group, in this case – the group of Polish immigrants to Welshpool, Wales. The data collected for the present study show that informal social ties visibly affect the process of learning a foreign language. All the participants in the study created a social network in the form of community of Polish immigrants working and living relatively close to each other. Most of them had known each other for many years before their arrival to the UK. As can be concluded from the information provided by the participants, a 'dense' social network combined with a strong sense of native social identity (national identity) can noticeably influence the tempo of learning L2. Those of Polish immigrants who felt the strong sense of Polish identity and prevalingly maintained contacts with their compatriots, had a lower level of satisfaction of L2 learning effects. It is worth noticing that they lacked the need and motivation to improve their English as they consciously chose to interact with other L1 users. On the other hand, the interviewees who created social networks including Brits (co-workers or schoolmates), improved their English language skills and were ready to make new non-native friends. They did not focus solely on their Polish identity; instead, they wanted to learn about the new culture and, consequently, expand their social identity.

Although the limited number of samples gathered for the purpose of the study cannot provide enough data for establishing a general pattern, the conclusion may serve as a starting point for a more extensive research project. Further research on the issue may be able to reveal the extent to which the strong sense of Polish national identity is influential in the difficult social situation of being in a foreign country and may function as a defence mech-

anism since living abroad without at least a basic knowledge of the resident language is often a highly stressful experience.

## Appendix

### QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When and where were you born?
2. What's your mother (first) language?
3. What's your second language?
4. Are there any other languages you speak?
5. When did you come to London? How old were you at that time?
6. Why did you decide to come here? To find a job/to study/to improve your English?
7. Did you learn English before coming to the UK? If yes, how long was that and how did you learn the language (regular school classes, special courses etc.)
8. Have you ever been to different parts of the UK before?
9. How do you learn English in the UK? Is it important for you to improve your language skills?
10. How would you assess your English before you came here and now?
11. Do you speak more Polish or English in everyday life situations?
12. How much Polish and English do you speak at home/at work/among friends/ when you have to communicate with British people (while doing the shopping etc.)?
13. Are there more Polish or English people in the community you live in?
14. Do you read any Polish newspapers/magazines or watch TV/radio programmes or films in Polish? How often do you do that?
15. Are you interested in what happens in Poland? Do you follow the news about the country of your origin?
16. How often do you go to Poland? Do you miss your country when you are in London?
17. How important it is for you to be recognized as a person of Polish origin?
18. Do you think the fact that you are Polish helps you in everyday life situations (like looking for a job etc.) or not? Are there any stereotypes of Polish people in the UK?
19. What do you think about English itself? Do you like the language, its melody etc.?
20. Do you like spending your free time with British people or do you prefer to have contact with your Polish friends? Do you take an active part in your community's social life?

21. What was the most difficult for you when you first came here? What kind of problems did you have as regards your new job, everyday life routine etc.?
22. Do you plan to settle down in London for good? Why?

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