

**Edu World 2016**  
**7th International Conference**

**LANGUAGE IS NOT ONLY ROOTS, BUT ALSO WINGS**

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**Abstract**

The article is based on a case study of a two female Israeli Ethiopian students who were enrolled in a teacher-education college. This study advances our understanding of the unique and complex situation of the Ethiopian immigrants. Observation of their use of the mother tongue compared with their use of the acquired language revealed their distinct identity-formation tendencies: one participant clearly demonstrated an **unreconciled identity**, whereas the other participant appeared to be in the process of forming a **reconciled identity**. This comparison sheds light on the mechanisms employed in the separation-individuation and in the identity-formation processes. These include a mechanism of abandoning one's native identity (in terms of belonging, tradition, and language), while on the other hand, a mechanism of highlighting aspects of the native culture. We also found that differentiation mechanisms were used regardless of participants' visibility, which resulted in a conflicting experience, allowing us to observe the strategies they used to cope with the conflict. At the same time, immigrants' language-related choices brought to the surface the conflict of their dual identity.

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**Keywords:** Ethiopian immigrants; identities; language; linguistic functions

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Beta-Israel Community**

The Ethiopian immigrants came to Israel mainly in two separate waves of immigration, in 1984 and in 1991. According to data retrieved from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2014, 131,400 Israeli residents (about 2.1 % of the population) were members of the Beta-Israel community (the term favored by members of the Ethiopian community); of these, approximately 84,600 were born in Ethiopia and 46,800 were born in Israel to Ethiopian parents. In the academic year (2012-2013), the total number of students enrolled in higher education programs was 309,650 (29.1%); of these, only 2,694 (0.87%) students were of Ethiopian descent (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). As the data clearly show,

the percentage of students of Ethiopian descent in higher education does not coincide with their rate in the population. This might be related to the high unemployment rate among this sector of the population, and the fact that socioeconomically, it is located on the bottom-most rung in the Israeli society.

Many studies have documented the social and cultural lives of the Beta-Israel community (Weil, 1989), as well as the social changes, the challenges, and the difficulties these immigrants encountered in trying to adapt to life in Israel's modern and individualistic society (Kalnisky, Millet, & Cohen, 2015; Kassan & Shabtai, 2005). While the community's efforts to integrate into Israeli society continue, there is a sense that the community has yet to find its "proper place" in the mosaic of Israeli society, in terms of its cultural visibility or invisibility (Ben Ezer, 2010). More specifically, the community aspires to be simultaneously visible and invisible: on the one hand, it aims to become an integral and therefore indistinct part of the host culture, to be treated equally; however, also means becoming invisible. On the other hand, the members of this community wish to preserve their uniqueness, to receive the kind of consideration that would allow them to maintain their specific cultural characteristics as immigrants; (Ben Ezer, 2010) and, in this sense, to remain visible.

## **1.2 The Diverse Nature of Multiculturalism**

An underlying assumption shared by most of the studies that examined the immigration processes of the Beta-Israel community was based on an ideological conviction, namely, that these immigrants wished to be integrated into Israel's mainstream society (Sever, 2001). In the first decades after the State of Israel was established (1948), it was guided by a social and educational policy called "the gathering of the Diaspora" or, following the example of the policy of the U.S., "the melting pot" (Sever, 2007). The goal of this policy was to eliminate the cultural visibility of the immigrant groups; in effect, however, the policy resulted in a phenomenon of negative visibility, as immigrant cultures were derided and their members were subjected to years of discrimination (Resnick, 2010). The desire of the Beta-Israel community was consistent with the policy of the host country, which encouraged covert assimilation alongside overt assimilation. Ever since the early days when the State of Israel was newly founded, the goal of covert assimilation was to distance the Jews who had emigrated from Islamic countries from their cultural heritage and to integrate them into what was termed "Israeli culture". Later, this approach was substituted by a policy of overt assimilation, which was based on the view that particularistic cultures of minority groups should disappear (in contrast to the monistic approach, which advocates for pluralism).

In recent years, the Ministry of Education, has announced that it is adopting a policy of multiculturalism and plans to implement it throughout the educational system (Amendments to the Law Regarding Educational Goals, 2000 and henceforth). Portera (2008) mentions several problems and limitations regarding the use of the term *multiculturalism*, especially in the field of education. When teachers and educators use the term in their work with children, it is perceived as something fashionable, and thus ceases to be part of an extensive educational policy. Although teachers mean to introduce the idea of multiculturalism in their classrooms, in effect they end up celebrating an exotic culture.

### 1.3 Psychological and Sociological Aspects of Immigrants Language and Identity

In psychology, *emotional language* is a term used to describe the channel through which one expresses one's deepest feelings, fears, and needs (Amir, 2013). Through language, the individual constructs his or her unique inner world. This concept refers not only to verbal language but also to other various modalities through which one communicates one's inner world to the environment. According to this concept, there is a duality to language, in the sense that it is simultaneously a product as well as a facilitator of individuation (Blos, 1967; Bollas, 1984). In addition to the fact that language, as a system of symbols, sidesteps the concrete, it also creates what we experience as our "inner reality" (page 152). In this sense, language is not only a means to achieve intimacy with the maternal figure, but also a means to separate from her in order to become an individual. The main function of the native language in the process of acquiring a language is to name objects and create links between them; the second function of the native language is the naming of the individual, which grants the child the status of a separate subject. This function helps form the individual's identity, as it provides the child with the emotional space in which to develop his or her unique mental observational capacity. The third function of a native language, which is also part of the development of an emotional language, is the transition from the subjective (first-person) observation of the self to an objective (third-person) view of the self. A flexible transition from subjective to objective perception enables the child to communicate the contents of his or her individual world to the other and to understand the other's world, the "pseudo-language" (Amir 2013).

For immigrants, the inner language has additional and even more complex functions, given that the child's emotional connection with the parents does not necessarily continue to be based on the native language, as the child (and often the parents too) acquire another language, which serves as a means of adapting to the new society. In some cases, the new language takes on the function of the native language; in other cases, both languages are used to maintain this function. These varying situations introduce additional aspects into the process of separation and individuation, related to the process of adapting to the new country (Sever, 2007).

From the perspective of the social context, the visibility of immigrant groups must be observable by the agents of the host culture. The mechanisms through which the agents "view" the immigrants should also be accounted for, particularly since the world and one's identity are constructed using language (Ben Porat, 2007). Thus, language is a major factor that contributes to the strengthening of the immigrant's identification with the particular ethnic or national group (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, & Barni, 2010).

The discourse through which the individual's identity is established encompasses all of the normative connections that exist between one's use of language and other symbolic expressions and the thoughts, feelings, art, values, and activities that are the by-products of language and its related symbolic forms of expression. These by-products are the means by which individuals identify themselves as belonging to a social network, which is significant to them.

Bourdieu (1991) claimed that social, historical, and political relationships are anchored in language and that linguistic behavior reflects the struggles between the various groups in each society. In the case of a society of immigrant groups, the desire to attain and preserve a positive social identity can be achieved only when a comparison with the dominant group produces a positive outcome for the immigrant group.

Mana, Or, & Mana (2004, 2007) found that the process of social integration of the Ethiopian community in Jewish Israeli society is perceived as enriching the individual and the group, without requiring abandonment of the original culture. This type of acculturation is termed *expanded identity*. In contrast, the term *competitive identity* describes situations in which the culture of the country of origin is perceived as superior to the local one, and the immigrants demand that it be recognized as a legitimate part of the existing context. The term *separatist identity* describes situations in which a distinction is purposely drawn between the original identity of the immigrant group and the identity of the host culture; maintaining this distinction can be a matter of choice or a response to rejection by the host culture.

The concept of *separatist identity* is an expansion of the concept of the *threatened identity* (Shabtai, 2001). The latter is characterized by the fact that the first generation of Ethiopian immigrants does not experience an identity crisis, despite the collective and individual experience of having their identity threatened. This is due to the active strategies that were used to contend with and overcome the threat to their identity (for example, emphasizing the Jewish religion which they have in common with the host culture). However, it appears that in the next generation, the immigrant identity of those who were born in Israel was not defined by an inclusive mechanism oriented towards integration. Rather, their identity was mostly defined by their skin color, which is the mechanism used by Israeli society to reject them.

In a previous study (Kalnisky & Baratz, in print), we identified two types of identity, related to the way Ethiopian immigrants (and their descendants) perceive themselves in the host society: an unreconciled and a reconciled identity. The *unreconciled identity* is characterized by three parameters: (1) there is a conflict between two identities, with one trying to overcome the other. In this case, the effort was to give precedence to the Israeli identity over the Ethiopian identity; (2) there is an attempt to reject the narrative, which emphasizes cultural visibility, and to accept the narrative of the hegemony; (3) a gap emerges between the individual's personal identity and the Israeli identity that characterizes the surrounding society. The *reconciled identity*, which attempts to create a single coherent identity that, encompasses both the old identity and the new identity. At this end of the spectrum, cultural visibility is not perceived as a threat. The narrative of the immigrant community is adopted, and the individual and social identities are perceived as complementary.

#### **1.4 Research Aims**

The article is based on a study of a two female Israeli Ethiopian students who were enrolled in a teacher-education college. This study advances our understanding of the unique and complex situation of the Ethiopian immigrants, in this particular instance -- as teachers, at the same time, these two stories, which were selected from 20 interviews we conducted, are representative of the challenges that these immigrants encounter in the acculturation process.

When designing this study, we had a dual purpose in mind. The first was to examine the manner in which these participants portrayed their personal identity within their social frameworks – the one they come from, i.e., the Ethiopian immigrant society, and the one into which they are attempting to integrate, i.e., Israeli society. The second aim was to examine the mechanisms that they developed in order to

strengthen their sense of self-efficacy when coping with the conflicts resulting from the clash between their two different worlds.

#### **1.4.1 Research Questions**

The goal of the study was to shed light on the role of language in the process of identity formation and in the process of separation-individuation (Bollas, 1984), among students from the Beta-Israel community. The concepts of reconciled identity and unreconciled identity were previously shown to contribute to the processes of identity shaping and separation-individuation. The two interviewees defined themselves using the terms *Israeli*, *Jewish*, and *Ethiopian* --presented in a varying order. Their description of their relationship with their two languages (their native language and the language spoken locally) reflected the degree to which they had become assimilated in the host society, indicating whether the environment had become a component of their identity.

Given this context, we posed the following question: What mechanisms did participants employ to contend with the identity conflict that emerges as a result of the use of and transition between two languages?

## **2. Methodology**

This is an interpretative study following the principle of an internal case study (Stake, 1995). The study aims to generate in-depth knowledge of the case in order to grasp its essence and gain insights that could be projected onto other cases with similarities or even differences. This method affords the researchers a better understanding of the distinctiveness and complexities of the individual cases within their particular contexts. In turn, this understanding enables the researcher to discern cause and effect connections, which often constitute the foundation for emergent hypotheses and theories.

### **2.1. Research Procedure**

#### **2.1.1. Data Analysis**

The approach used to analyze the collected data combined a macro- and a micro-analysis (Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). A holistic, macro-analysis entailed an examination of the form and content of the narrative, whereas the microanalysis was comprised of a content analysis related to the authentic themes and issues that emerged during the interviews.

A qualitative-interpretative research method is based on multifaceted critical discourse analysis (Klein, 2010). Here we traced sociocultural connections and hidden meanings derived from them according to the principle of critical discourse analysis, focusing on social problems (Gee, 2004; Van Dijk, 1988, 1991). Gee (2004) studied different forms of verbal abuse directed towards deprived minority groups, based on ethnicity.

### **2.2. Ethics**

The students in the teacher-education College consented to participate in the study; they were aware of that the data they provided would be gathered and used for the research and they understood its aims. Personal details have been omitted to conceal the identity of the participants.

### 3. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the story of each of the interviewees, followed by its analysis. In the second stage, similarities and differences that emerged between the interviewees are noted. This comparison sheds light on the mechanisms employed in the separation -individuation and in the identity-shaping process. On the one hand, we found a mechanism of *abandoning* one's native identity (in terms of belonging, tradition, and language); while on the other hand, we found a mechanism of *highlighting* aspects of the native culture. We also found that, *differentiation mechanisms* are used despite participants' visibility, which indicate a conflicting experience, and a presentation of the processes used to cope with the conflict.

#### 3.1. The Story of Elana

"I was born in Israel and I do not speak Amharic. My parents brought me up to integrate into the Israeli milieu; they were also born in Israel. They rarely speak Amharic between them, except with their parents. Actually, I had not affiliated myself with the Ethiopian community. During my [compulsory] military service, my role was as a teacher working with soldiers who were Ethiopian immigrants. My commander said: "You are intimately familiar with the *human material*, so you are best equipped to help them...." Actually, I was not well prepared for it, and I told him so: "I have no connection to the community". I put it to him bluntly: "Do you need my skin to be painted white to understand that I can never belong to the Ethiopian community? I do not know the Amharic language; I do not know the Ethiopian mentality. (Defiantly) To me, the Amharic letters look like graphic ornamentation".

##### 3.1.1. Analysis of Elana's Story

The story of Elana Demonstrates the conflict in which she is immersed, due to the tension between visibility (skin color) and her inner feelings, which are incongruent with what her appearance communicates to her environment. It is a tension between the Israeli hegemonic society's expectation that she be different and her own feeling of belonging to that very society. As a result, her commander reflects Israeli society's expectation that she serve as a bridge between the hegemonic society and the Beta-Israel community, a role that she cannot fulfill. Her defiant tone and attitude when she spoke about the Amharic typography emphasized her desire to be an Israeli and to "erase" all the Ethiopian cultural trappings. Her story demonstrates that she rejects Amharic even as the native language of her parents, as it is not her language; instead, with her parents' encouragement, she acquired the language that would ensure better integration into society (Amir, 2013). At this point, she does not want to be affiliated with a language that is associated with a lower social status (that of the soldiers who recently emigrated from Africa).

Elana expresses an unreconciled identity. The mechanism she uses is denial, when she refuses to use the native language of her parents and bases this on the fact that her parents were born in Israel. She also distances herself from the Ethiopian tradition and language and is unwilling to help preserve them, as she refuses to accompany and assist soldiers who emigrated from Ethiopia. She emphasizes her distancing from the language and the community despite the visibility of her ethnic roots. This visibility creates a

predisposition among those who surround her; however, Elana distinguishes between ethnic roots and the desire to use the Amharic language. She feels no conflict in terms of her identity: to her it is clear and unreconciled. She conscientiously chose an Israeli identity and her place in the sociological fabric emphasizes her process of differentiation and separation.

### **3.2. The Story of Esti**

Esti, described going with her mother to a parent-teacher meeting at school. During the conversation between the teacher and her mother, she saw her mother nodding her head as the teacher spoke. At the end of the meeting, her mother thanked the teacher and they left. On the way home, Esti could not hold back her tears. When her mother asked her why she was crying, she explained that it was not because the teacher said horrible things about her, but because the teacher did not even notice that her mother did not understand of a word of what was said.

#### **3.2.1. Analysis of Esti's Story**

Esti's story describes a process of identity formation that has not yet reached completion; it appears that this identity is tending towards the reconciled identity. The centrality of the language issue reveals her conflict. On the one hand, she has an intimate relationship with her mother; given that her mother is her source of support and that her mother's native language is Esti's own emotional language. On the other hand, Esti has no choice but to function in an environment governed by a different language. However, becoming functional might entail a loss of intimacy with her mother. At this stage, the intimacy with the mother prevails, a situation that underscores her inner conflict. It is this experience of conflict that gives rise to her tears of frustration

At the same time, the teacher, whose professional identity should be manifested as a type of surrogate mother in the context of the learning environment, does not give Esti the option to differentiate herself, but rather strengthens Esti's loyalty to her inner language? Esti is driven to tears because of her unclear and incomplete identity, torn as it is between the world of her mother's native Amharic language and the language of the environment, i.e., Hebrew, which is represented by the teacher. Each language carries its own inherent code; Esti's silence during the meeting between her teacher and her mother is proof of her inability to formulate a separate identity.

### **3.3. Comparison**

The two stories of the second generation of immigrants reflect the participants' conflict with their roots and the use of each of the two languages. Both participants mention both languages Amharic and Hebrew; however, whereas Elana openly denied her Ethiopian identity, Esti has yet to come to terms with her differentiation from the mother; which is why the linguistic gap between her teacher and her mother brings her to tears. These two narratives provide insight into the identity-formation process of each participant and reveal the differences in their relative degree of awareness of the identity-formation process.

Elana demonstrates an awareness of her inner truth. She is not afraid to emphasize her sense of identity: she is strong enough to insist on it despite the visibility of her ethnic roots. In contrast, Esti would prefer to avoid the conflict altogether. Her identity is not yet clear. She did not force her mother to

admit to the teacher that she does not understand Hebrew, suggesting that Esti's relationship with the teacher is less than sincere, whereas her relationship with her mother is both intimate and loyal, indicating that her mother's native language is also her own emotional and inner language (Amir, 2013).

#### 4. Conclusions

Using the concepts introduced here, namely, *reconciled* and *unreconciled identity*, helped shed light on the relationship between the language mechanism and the process of identity formation, that is, the manner in which each participant constructs the self. The second language can replace the native language, as in the example of Elana, or the languages can coexist, one alongside the other, but then, as in Esti's example, the language mechanism emphasizes the individual's sense of foreignness. These contrasting cases demonstrate that the various identity mechanisms are derived from the manner in which the individual chooses to use the two languages. In each case, the language choice represents the individual's way of coping with the dual identity and one's stage in the identity-formation process.

The following coping approaches can be distinguished.

- a) The individual could lean towards the formation of a reconciled or an unreconciled identity (Elana's example tends towards an unreconciled identity; Esti's example tends towards a reconciled identity).
- b) Use of both languages could indicate an identity that is always teetering between the two options: on the one hand, there is the desire to preserve one's cultural heritage; on the other hand, there is a desire to relinquish it completely (demonstrated by our two cases).
- c) The native language might be perceived as mere "ornamentation", suggesting an awareness of the separate function of each language: the native language might be the language of emotions and perceptions, but the language of the environment may serve as a pseudo-language, (Amir, 2013), used only to manage everyday-life tasks.
- d) Resistance against the use of the native language can serve to deny any separateness between the self and the other.

Immigrants' approach to their languages is thus indicative of the way they choose to formulate their identity. Both of the personal stories described here substantiate the phenomenon described at the outset of this study, namely, that the community of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel is receding from a position of uniqueness and is still searching for its "appropriate" place within the mosaic of Israeli society, especially as it relates to the community's visibility or invisibility (Ben Ezer, 2010). In the context of this socialization process, the use of the language, , can be seen to reflect both internal, micro-level gaps in the relationship between immigrant parents and their children, as well as macro-level community processes, which in turn affect interpersonal interactions and relationships.

These varying approaches are brought into play in response to the community members' desire to make the knowledge related to their cultural heritage accessible to the entire society. Endowing their unique story with a universal dimension is an indication of the desire to have their cultural narrative be appropriated by the general society, and thus to obliterate the visibility and the weak image. Their choice regarding the use of their two languages can help structure a cultural code that provides and organizes



social meaning and, most importantly, is capable of breaking through the barrier of social exclusion, by giving voice to the "silenced identity" (Zamir, & Baratz, 2013). At the same time, immigrants' language-related choices bring to the surface the conflict of their dual identity. For immigrants, language is not only an expression of their roots; it also gives them wings.

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