

## The Identifying Function of Language\*

Key words: functions of language, community, political changes and conflicts, ideology

Sociolinguistic view on the functions of language allows to pay more attention to its identifying (representative) function. Although it is deep-rooted in the methodological awareness of Polish linguists, the terms which denote this function are rarely used, which is illustrated by the lack thereof in the *Encyclopaedia of General Linguistics* (POLAFISKI, ed., 1999)<sup>1</sup> or the *Encyclopaedia of the Polish Language* (KUCAŁA, URBAŃCZYK, eds., 1999). The identifying function is distinguished in various papers on the so-called affectionadoism of the Polish language (Cf. TASZYCKI, 1953: LXXXIX; KLEMENSIEWICZ, 1961: 8–19), and indirectly in the call for historical-linguistic research which presents correlation of the language with external facts such as political history, culture, religion, etc. (KLEMENSIEWICZ, 1961: 15–19; BAJEROWA, 1972: 27–39; GRABIAS S., 1997: 70–71). It may be, however, surprising that some papers call language “a treasure trove of national culture” and “indicator of national identity” and yet never mention terms which could denote such a function of language (BARTMIŃSKI J., 1993: especially 16–17 and 21–22). Marian BUGAJSKI (1999: cf. 26–169; 188–189) for example, mentions as many as 16 functions of language (distortive, distributive, expressive, emotional, impressive, informative, communicative, control, magical, myth-creating, compelling, persuasive, cognitive, rationing, syntactic, stylistic), yet still does not include the identifying function among them. It is interesting that one of the most influential modern “lawmakers” and codifiers of the Polish language (apart from Jan Miodek), Andrzej MARKOWSKI (1999), omits the identifying function while describing the values of the Polish language and emphasising the role of language in the functioning of the nation and country. Other sources of information, such as general encyclopaedias and textbooks, also mention functions of language going way beyond 3 Bühler’s and 2 Jakobson’s functions, however, neglecting the identifying function.

As this article aims at precise term given to one of the prominent functions of language often discussed in various liberal arts and in journalism focusing on politics, the scope of which the linguists and sociologists are more or less aware of and which they name usually by means of paraphrase, one should give some thought to: firstly, the modern definition of what we want to refer to as the identifying function; and secondly, the linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Funkcje języka*.

justification of the form of this term. It is even more important given the fact that Polish linguistics tends to incorporate synonymous terms for the terms translated into Polish from another language, due to insufficient effort put into correlating them, for example, Bühler's *Darstellung* (literally "introductory function," Polish: *funkcja przedstawieniowa*) appears in Polish literature on the subject as *congnitive* (Polish: *kognitywna*), *symbolic* (Polish: *symboliczna*), *denotative* (Polish: *denotatywna*), *referential* (Polish: *referencyjna*), *representative* (Polish: *reprezentatywna*), etc. As a matter of fact, foreign linguistics which has been using terms referring to identifying function also lacks uniformity and clarity in this regard (RADOVANOVIC, 1986: 71–77).

Functions of language may be classified and hierarchised on the basis of philosophical, anthropological, and pragmatic assumptions, which give language the highest rank in the logic and culture systems and treat language as: a) "a transcendental fact which does not have any genesis, as the logical truth being a property of the transcendental language is relatively identical with the ontic truth of a being" (SZOŁTYSEK, 1985: 118) and, at the same time, b) a phenomenon entwined with cultural background. Such approach has many advocates among many disciplines of the liberal arts (cf. e.g. ANUSIEWICZ, 1995: 10–69), and will make it easier to define the scope of the identifying function being the central point of this article.

What does 'identifying' stand for? The dictionary definition distinguishes three semantic-communicative layers of this term: 1) general: "stating, determining one's identity; distinguishing; recognising;" 2) psychological: a) "associating one person with another by transferring the feelings one has for one person onto another; also: associating one object with another," b) "associating oneself with another person, usually one has strong, positive feelings for by means of reliving his/her successes and failures as one's own;" 3) sociological: "associating oneself (might refer to individuals as well as to groups) with beliefs or other values shared by other people or other group." "Language identifies or has the identifying function" means that it "informs it has the capability of associating various individuals who may say that due to their language they develop a bond of connection for other people who consider the same language as their own." Such capability may be present on two levels: the level of individuals and the level of societies. We shall therefore mention: 1) the identification of individuals, that is, the idiolect (KLEMENSIEWICZ, 1961: 204) and 2) the identification of certain groups and communities, that is, the language of a given region (dialect), the language of a group of people of certain profession (sociolect), the language of a given ethnic group, the language of a given nation (national language), and the language of a given country. We will not deliberate on the idiolect, as it rather is the subject of psychological research or research into stylistics, and may be considered a scope of the expressive and impressive functions of language. The indentifying function on the level of an individual shall not be associated with the capability of the language to determine (the referential function) (TOPOLIŃSKA, 1976: 33–72), as this takes place in the text and may involve any object. The said function, on the other hand, applies only to people (individuals and groups of people), showing the relation between them and other people. These are regulated by culture (e.g., myths, symbols, historical awareness), law (e.g., acts on languages in particular nations, international declarations on the liberty of using a given national or ethnic language), and usually are evaluative in nature.

We will take a closer look at the identification on the level of society, and narrow it down to identification of a nation (and of an ethnic group, partly) as opposed to the identification of a country. We will not, however, go into intricate details of the legal status of the languages, and language policy and planning (RADOVAŃIĆ, 1986: 186–197; LUBAŚ, 2000: 111–120). Anyway, we may state that most people refer to the language they use while they confirm their ethnic or national identity, or (less often) identity of a country, which results from the identifying awareness of an individual entwined in the great social structure. For instance, Silesians and Kashubians, intentionally use the regional dialects in the public sphere if they want to emphasise their ethnic identity. The intention of one film director giving a speech in Polish in front of the respectable English-speaking audience at the award ceremony in the US was, as he claimed, to underline the Polishness of his talent. His language, therefore, served the function of identification, as the communicative function has no place in a situation like this.

One may consider the hierarchy of the functions of language from the historical perspective, following their occurrence in the process of ontogenesis. This is the scope of glotogenesis. This perspective gives priority to communicative and cognitive functions, which cannot, however, exist without physical and psychological context (expressive function) which is subjected to slow evolution, and cultural context which evolves at much faster pace. While not much can be said about the beginnings of communicative and cognitive functions, such notions as: ethnicity, nation, country, homeland, profession, region may be pinpointed and defined within a given timeframe quite precisely. Their definitions have evolved over time, which is often described in numerous papers on the emerging and evolving of communities. Their authors note that people, while becoming aware of their identity, associate themselves with the group by means of positive evaluation, which is also transferred onto words used to name and describe that group and groups which it cooperates with. Of course, the names are not evaluated equally in terms of emotions, they are, however, changeable and depend on the attitude towards the object they define. The terms used to denote an object one identifies with are usually positive, while the names referring to 'the others' depend on the attitude towards the signified. Evaluative names and descriptions of Polish ethnic groups may serve as enlightening examples in that subject (PISARKOWA, 1976; PEISERT, 1992). Therefore, the identifying function encompasses both association and positive valorisations (i.e., ascribing positive values to something). It refers also to identified individual features of a language. There is a wide range of evaluative devices at hand, both positive and negative (LUBAŚ, 1989: 498–501). The individual identifying him-/herself with various social groups (ethnic, religious, regional, nation, country) at the same time may value these instances of identification differently, which results in the changeable character of the identifying function of language. If language serves as identifying measure in terms of a given group (e.g., country, nation) it is valued accordingly. If the language does not take part in the identification of a given group (as may happen, e.g., in case of religion or region), it does not serve the identifying function and, therefore, is not evaluative.

Nowadays, due to integration processes taking part in Europe (globalisation) and disintegration as well, the argument of the language being an indicator of national and ethnic identity became very useful in terms of political reasons. It may be useful to present a vivid

example of such behaviour referring to the most explosive region of Europe: Yugoslavia. Due to the dissolution of the state, the Serbo-Croatian language disintegrated into three (or maybe even four) separate languages: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and aspiring to the status of a language – Montenegrin (FELESZKO, 1999: 141–162).<sup>2</sup>

Serbo-Croatian was standardised in 1850 thanks to Vienna Literary Agreement signed by Croatian and Serbian cultural and political activists. This decision aimed at showing the unity of the two biggest Slavic nations on the Balkan Peninsula: Serbs and Croats living in two countries, that is, multinational Habsburg Austro-Hungarian rule, and Serbia, newly-liberated from the Ottoman rule. By this act a language was established and given a two-word name referring to the unity between two nations which had already developed their national (literary) languages, which had not, however, maintained continuity due to various political impediments. Serbia lost independence following the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 which resulted in a few centuries long non-existence of Serbia as a country. In Croatian cultural centres under Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman rule regional standardised norms emerged based on local dialects (Chakavian, Kajkavian, and Shtokavian) and using different alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic). However, these norms were not durable enough to become the basis of modernised codification which could suit the needs of the present. This way Serbo-Croatian was created: a language of compromise, with normative grammar based on Eastern Herzegovinian subdialect, new Shtokavian, which comprised certain elements of language spoken by the majority of Serbs and certain elements of language used by part of Croats. The genetic closeness of both elements of the new language ensured communicative function similar to before the unification. This language, however, gained an additional, new function: it demonstrated the political and genetic unity of two nations which were striving after a common country. At this stage, the identifying function may be discussed on the political (and maybe, to a certain extent, cultural) plane. When in 1918 the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (*Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*) came into existence, Serbo-Croatian one of the two official languages, next to Slovenian, a language with four-century's tradition, though many Germanic influences. In such situation, the identifying function of Serbo-Croatian could not serve neither national identification (as it was spoken by a few nations, including Montenegro), nor country identification (due to ethnic conflicts, usually involving Serbs and Croats, and the fact that it was being used in parallel with Slovenian). Nevertheless, it did identify these two nations, at least by its name including both of them. Still, even that matter was a bone of contention as there was a long-standing dispute on which nation should appear first in the name of the language. Nonetheless, the population of the users of Serbo-Croatian constituted 2/3 of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which allowed at least for partial identification of the country. The situation became even more complicated after WW2, with the rise of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. A third official language was introduced (Macedonian) which called for new language policy giving equal rights to all three languages in terms of federal law, while favouring particular languages in certain republics. This way Serbo-Croatian became dominant in 4 republics: Socialist Republic of Serbia, Socialist Republic of Croatia, Socialist

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<sup>2</sup> Montenegrin became the official language of Montenegro with the ratification of a new constitution on 22 October 2007 [translator's note].

Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Socialist Republic of Montenegro, and therefore among 4 nations: Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Muslim nation which emerged just after the war; yet on the federal level, Serbo-Croatian was just one of three languages of equal status. Two nations (Montenegrins and Muslims) were made to use a “foreign” language the name of which did not refer to their national symbol. This would have been irrelevant if there had been a supranational and supraethnic bond that united a federation (as e.g. in the US) and if the society of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had not been susceptible to nationalist ideology. Since these two conditions were relevant, linguistic conflicts escalated. Out of necessity, language rights were granted to certain nations (e.g., Albanians), nationalities (e.g., Romani and Rus’ people), and minorities (e.g., Romanians, Hungarians, Italians). This way, the number of languages competing with Serbo-Croatian grew, which, in the light of escalating claims for expanding the rights of the Slovene language (TOPORIŠIČ, 1991: 137–218), constant emancipation attempts of the Croatian language (FELESZKO, 1999: 145–147), and the attempts to create a separate Serbo-Croatian cultural identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, severely diminished the identifying function of Serbo-Croatian as a language that is most widely used in the country of Yugoslavia. In the last years before the breakup of Yugoslavia only 8–10% of the people identifying themselves as “Yugoslavs” considered Serbo-Croatian “their” language. These issues with identification were particularly strong in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the biggest systemic variation of Serbo-Croatian was allowed (as well as using two alphabets). This, paired with concealed efforts of the authorities to increase the political independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, resulted in using odd names for the variant of language spoken in that region, for example, “standard literary-cultural Bosnian-Herzegovinian word.” As a matter of fact, in the last years before the breakup of Yugoslavia Serbo-Croatian was referred to in more than ten different ways. “Firstly, it was *Serbo-Croato-Slovenian*. By that one should understand separate Slovenian [sic] and separate Serbian, that is, Croatian. After 1945 it was called interchangeably *Serbian and Croatian*, *Croatian*, that is, *Serbian*, *Serbo-Croatian*, *Croato-Serbian*, *Serbian*, that is, *Croatian*, *Serbo-Croatian*, that is, *Croato-Serbian*, etc.” (FELESZKO, 1999: 149–150). It turns out that such multitude of terms used for one of the strongest languages in Yugoslavia did not result from the linguistic/stylistic problems, but with issues connected with identification, which were not solved by any of the variants. Each nation using Serbo-Croatian (i.e., Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and newly-formed Muslim nation) strived for emphasising their rights to the language they used in its name, hence the two variants: Serbo-Croatian and Croato-Serbian. It is therefore not surprising that after the breakup of the federation, when new countries emerged, the constitutions of Croatia and Serbia declared Croatian and Serbian as their official languages. The Bosnian language received legitimacy due to the Dayton Agreement (1995). It was supposed to be used by Muslims in their federal country, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which, apart from Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian are used.

Many researchers deliberated on the causes of the breakup of the language which had a 150-year-long tradition, well-established equivalence and normative grammar, dictionaries, and international approval. Most commonly they seek these causes in the external political factors. There is much truth to that for sure, however, oftentimes the most important reason, relating to the Serbo-Croatian language itself, is passed over. Serbo-Croatian had

never developed a full-fledged identifying function on the level of such big social group. It did not sustain neither national bond (as it was a language used by many nations in a multinational and multiethnic country), nor a bond within countrymen (as it functioned, and competed with, two other languages in a “non-national,” authoritarian country), nor a cultural bond (as it represented a conglomerate of three great cultures: Western – Roman and Catholic, Eastern – Byzantine and Orthodox, and Muslim). What is more, Serbo-Croatian was used in regions which had been susceptible to nationalist ideology which had the upper hand over unifying tendencies emphasising bonds. At the same time, the status of Serbo-Croatian was strengthened by the fact that it was a second language for many Yugoslavian national communities, it served well the communicative function in the whole country, it was a language of literature of high artistic value (e.g., Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Krleža), it was used in institutions, and represented the country abroad. However, those merits acting in favour of identification on the level of big social groups were not strong enough for the Serbo-Croatian to achieve a dominant position in the country. That is why this breakup took place in the midst of political turbulence. This example shows how important is the role of the identifying function in maintaining the stability of the language. In order to preserve it, even the communicative function may be sacrificed.

Speaking about the identifying function one should mention the issue of the values in the language and the value of language itself (PUZYŃINA, 1992). We will not focus on evaluation of identification on the level of an individual which fluctuates on a wide scale of positive and negative valorisation (LUBAŚ, 1989: 498–501). Evaluation present on the level of the group usually comes down to high positive value associated with the object of evaluation: language, national language, country, nation, nationality, etc. Let us stop for a moment and focus on the values of the language itself which are defined as follows: “Language can be considered an intrinsic value of culture, comparable to art or science; it refers both to language as system (code) and as text and utterance. Humans react to language in both these senses as to an aesthetic and cognitive value” (MARKOWSKI, PUZYŃINA, 2001: 54). If this statement was true, each language and each of its functions would always have intrinsic value, and people’s reaction to this value should be unanimous. Meanwhile, due to the identifying function, the evaluation varies among the society. One values his/her own language the most. This statement does not need to be supported by extensive research, including Polish research papers. It is sufficient to mention current discussion on the deluge of English borrowings in the Polish language or very negative evaluation of the Russian language not so far ago. Such positive attitude towards one language may result in chauvinist attitude towards one’s own language and xenophobic attitudes towards other languages (FISHMAN, 1975: 23–38; GAJDA, 1999: 39). The objective intrinsic value of the language as the pillar of culture is modified on the level of the awareness of social groups: what constitutes value for one group may be an anti-value for the other. There are many examples of such situations, mainly coming from the era of partitions in Poland. Using German and Russian was frowned upon or even condemned. Similarly, speaking Polish was forbidden in certain areas of Poland occupied by Germans (BAJEROWA, ed., 1996: 12). During the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) I read a Croatian poem (nb. with Polish translation) which declared hatred for the Cyrillic being the alphabet of the enemy country.

Let us try to enlist most important conclusions:

1. A deeply rooted conviction about the existence of 6 functions of language only (Bühler's functions and Jakobson's function) has changed over time. The list of functions was expanded by adding new ones or synonymous terms, the identifying function was not, however, underlined well enough, especially in Polish linguistic lexicon.
2. Assuming from a logical and anthropological point of view that language is not just a "simple" element of culture, but rather a pillar thereof, we claim that it has more and less durable elements and their functions may be arranged in a hierarchy. The identifying function belongs to elements of average durability, changeable over time, gaining high importance (next to the communicative function) in tumultuous political situations (ethnic conflicts). The course of the breakup of Serbo-Croatian confirms this thesis.
3. The identifying function of language(s) is protected and sustained firstly by the cultural community, and secondly (maybe mainly) by law: national and international law.
4. The identifying function is always connected to evaluation which highlights (sometimes excessively) positive assets of one's own group and its language. This evaluation is then transferred onto intergroup and international level. This way a group and language that is not "mine/ours" may be considered worse.
5. We want to popularise the term *identifying function of language* and call for unifications of terms synonymous terms or paraphrases used to denote it in Polish linguistics. It does not have any colloquial associations with the base for derivation which ensures lack of ambiguity.
6. The identifying function is realised on the level of an individual (and in such case may be considered equal with expressive function manifested in idiolect), and on the level of a group. In modern culture (including politics) language plays a significant role in group identification and identity (nations, countries, cultures).
7. The identifying function (on the level of a society) is a function of language which based on certain traits of the group of people (usually cultural, ideological, less frequently: religious) using that given language may gain capability of creating bond between people admitting to certain traits and motivating people to common actions if it is protected by law, state, and international community.

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### The Identifying Function of Language

#### Summary

The linguistic literature (Bühler, Jakobson) mostly mentions six functions of language, paying little attention to the identifying function. Following the assumption that language is not an 'ordinary' element of culture, but is its main basis, we believe that it has more and less stable elements, whose functions are arranged hierarchically.

The identifying function has medium stability, is historically variable and becomes particularly important during intensive political changes or (nationalistic) conflicts. An example might be the recent split of Serbo-Croatian into three languages. The identifying function is always connected with evaluation, which often exaggerates the positive character of a group and its language. Other groups



and other languages can be perceived as worse. The identifying function is realized both individually (it can be identified with the expressive function of an individual then) and in a group. In this role it is often used or even abused in modern culture and especially politics.

Instead of synonyms and periphrastic expressions we suggest that Polish linguists should make use of the term *identifying function of language* defined as a nationally or internationally protected function (based on cultural, ideological, or – less frequently – religious elements) which enables a group of people of common aims, beliefs, ideas and interests to create a community.

Key words: functions of language, community, political changes and conflicts, ideology

