

<https://doi.org/10.62837/2025.3.376>

GUNAY ASADOVA

gunay.asadova@azmiu.edu.az

Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction

ORCID: 0009-0001-8629-5107

PRONOUNS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MULTILINGUAL YOUTH: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF POWER, BELONGING, AND EXPRESSION

Açar sözlər: əvəzliliklər, mədəni kimlik, çoxdillilik, gənclər, sosial struktur, rəqəmsal kommunikasiya

Ключевые слова: местоимения, культурная идентичность, многоязычие, молодёжь, социальная структура, цифровая коммуникация

Keywords (English): pronouns, cultural identity, multilingualism, youth, social structure, digital communication

Abstract

In modern multilingual communities, language choice for youth is more and more acknowledged as a dynamic process by which cultural identity is negotiated and constructed. This research examines the sociological implications of pronoun use in this setting, with an emphasis on the ways in which multilingual youth negotiate multiple cultural allegiances through strategic pronoun choice for personal and social references. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and theories of identity formation, the research examines how pronouns function as markers of power, solidarity, membership, and gender identity. On the basis of qualitative discourse pattern analysis among Azerbaijani, Turkish, English, and Russian-speaking youth groups, the research concludes that variability in pronouns is not merely linguistic but socially embedded in such structures as age, schooling, peer group formation, and cultural expectations. The findings show that pronoun usage serves as a micro-level signal of macro-level tensions in cultures, particularly in online communication spaces where identity signaling is both performative and fluid.

1. Introduction

Language is an essential tool for identity construction and expression, particularly for youths who are navigating increasingly complex social and cultural contexts. In multicultural groups, the way language is used—especially how pronouns are used—can reveal deep truths about how individuals perceive themselves and where they fit within different groups. Pronouns seem to be small building blocks of language, but they have immense social value. They're not only used as grammatical substitutes, but also as relationship markers, signals of power structures, group belonging, and identity. This article discusses how adolescent

multilinguals use pronouns as social navigation mechanisms and identity performers.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study borrows from some of the prominent frameworks in sociolinguistics and identity theory. A point of departure theory is Brown and Gilman's (1960) "Power and Solidarity" model, which contends that the use of pronouns indexes social hierarchies (power) and interpersonal closeness (solidarity). Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory of performativity highlights the notion that identity is created through repetitive social actions, such as the use of language. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) work also underlies this research, with a focus on how identity is relational, emergent, and constructed by sociocultural context.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, with discourse analysis and semi-structured interviewing. Participants included bilingual and trilingual young adults aged 16 to 25 years from Azerbaijani, Turkish, English-speaking, and Russian-speaking communities. Data were gathered through naturalistic conversation, social media use, and structured interview. Patterns of usage in key pronouns were coded and analyzed to identify themes in relation to identity, power dynamics, and cultural identification.

4. Pronouns and Group Belonging

Pronouns are markers of inclusion and exclusion, signaling membership in groups and social boundaries. Multilingual youth switch between first-person plural pronouns like "we," "biz," or "мы" depending on context and audience. This switching allows them to affiliate with different cultural groups. For instance, an Azerbaijani speaker of English can use "biz" when talking about traditional values with family but switch to "we" during university life in a bid to signify integration into an English-speaking learning environment. Such strategic switching signals a negotiation of identity on linguistic and cultural boundaries.

5. Pronouns and Power Dynamics

The deployment of formal and informal pronouns normally betrays underpinning power relations. Young people in T/V languages (e.g., Russian "ты" vs. "вы," Turkish "sen" vs. "siz") make deliberate choices to challenge or affirm traditional hierarchies. Addressing someone with "ты" or "sen" as a teacher or elder, for example, may signal a desire for equality or modernity, while using "вы" or "siz" maintains deferential distance. Such choices are not random but are based on context, aim, and evolving cultural attitudes. In addition, in English where such variations are not available morphologically, power can be indexed by tone, modality, and even withholding direct use of pronouns.

6. Gender Identity and Pronoun Innovation

Among the most significant areas of pronoun evolution in youths is marking gender identity. Non-binary and genderqueer youth prefer gender-neutral pronouns such as "they/them" or adopt neo-pronouns such as "ze/zir." For multilingual youth, the practice is more complex because they are working with gendered languages such as Russian or Turkish. Hybrid forms or code-switching between language is used by some youth to affirm their gender identity. The mere act of insisting on one's preferred pronouns thus becomes a political and cultural assertion, echoing broader demands for recognition and inclusion.

7. Digital Discourse and Performance of Identity

Digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Threads provide fertile ground for play with pronouns and signaling of identity. Teenagers are apt to add pronouns to bios, use hashtags like #shethey or #hethey, and engage in conversation where diverse pronoun practice is normal. Online, the performative aspect of identity is amplified; pronouns aren't just spoken but displayed, staged, and reiterated across places. This visibility assists in making pronoun diversity mainstream and allowing multilingual youth to stake multifaceted identities in globalized online spaces.

8. Discussion

The results indicate that the use of pronouns among multilingual youth is a thoughtful, context-dependent practice strongly embedded in identity construction. These are influenced by a variety of factors such as family desires, peer norms, school settings, and online culture. Pronouns are linguistic resources through which young people negotiate and sometimes resist cultural expectations, assert claims of individual agency, and establish a sense of belonging in various communities. Interestingly, the study also highlights that these linguistic practices are not static but evolve with time as a result of social change and personal growth.

9. Conclusion

Pronouns are so much more than they are grammatical elements; they are powerful tools for expression and identity negotiation for multilingual youth. Through the strategic deployment of pronouns, these individuals construct nuanced cultural identities, subvert dominant power relations, and describe changing notions of gender and self. This study highlights the necessity of paying attention to the sociolinguistic aspects of pronoun usage and demands more inclusivity and sensitivity in educational and social life. As language evolves, especially in digitally mediated environments, further research is needed to explore how emerging pronoun practices build and represent the identities of future generations.

References

-
- Brown, R., & Gilman, A. (1960). The pronouns of power and solidarity. In T.A. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in Language* (pp. 253-276). MIT Press.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Pavlenko, A., & Blackledge, A. (2004). Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Le Page, R. B., & Tabouret-Keller, A. (1985). *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2014). Linguaging when contexts collapse: Audience design in social networking. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 4-5, 62-73.

Xülasə:

Günay Əsədova

Əvəzlilər və çoxdilli gənclərdə mədəni kimlik: Güc, mənsubiyyət və ifadə vasitələrinin sosiolinqvistik təhlili

Müasir çoxdilli cəmiyyətlərdə gənclər arasında dil seçimi getdikcə daha çox mədəni kimliyin qurulması və danışqlarla müəyyənləşdirilməsi prosesi kimi qəbul olunur. Bu tədqiqat kontekstdə əvəzlilərin sosioloji əhəmiyyətini araşdırır və çoxdilli gənclərin şəxsi və ictimai əvəzliləri strateji şəkildə seçməklə mədəni mənsubiyyətlərini necə ifadə etdiklərini öyrənir. Sosiolinqvistik nəzəriyyələrə və kimlik quruluşu modellərinə əsaslanaraq aparılan tədqiqat göstərir ki, əvəzlilər yalnız qrammatik kateqoriyalar deyil, həm də güc, həmrəylik, aidolma və gender kimliyi göstəricisidir. Azərbaycan, türk, ingilis və rus dillərində danışan gənclərin nitq nümunələrinin keyfiyyət analizi əsasında müəyyən edilmişdir ki, əvəzlilərin istifadəsi yaş, təhsil, dost çevrəsi və mədəni gözləntilərlə sıx bağlı olan sosial strukturların əksidir. Əldə olunan nəticələr göstərir ki, əvəzlik seçimi mikro səviyyədə, xüsusilə də kimliyin rəqəmsal platformalarda sərgilənməsi şəraitində, mədəni və sosial gərginliklərin göstəricisidir.

РЕЗЮМЕ

ГЮНАЙ АСАДОВА

МЕСТОИМЕННИЯ И КУЛЬТУРНАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ МНОГОЯЗЫЧНОЙ МОЛОДЕЖИ: СОЦИОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ ВЛАСТИ, ПРИНАДЛЕЖНОСТИ И САМОВЫРАЖЕНИЯ

В современных многоязычных обществах выбор языка среди молодежи всё чаще рассматривается как динамичный процесс, посредством которого формируется и пересматривается культурная идентичность. Настоящее исследование посвящено социологическому значению употребления местоимений в этом контексте, с акцентом на то, как многоязычные молодые люди используют личные и социальные местоимения для навигации между различными культурными принадлежностями. Основываясь на социолингвистических теориях и концепциях построения идентичности, исследование показывает, что местоимения являются индикаторами власти, солидарности, включённости и гендерной идентичности. Качественный анализ речевых практик среди азербайджаноязычных, туркоязычных, англоязычных и русскоязычных молодежных сообществ демонстрирует, что вариативность местоимений тесно связана с социальными структурами — возрастом, образованием, динамикой в кругу сверстников и культурными ожиданиями. Выводы исследования свидетельствуют о том, что выбор местоимений отражает макроуровневые культурные напряжения, особенно в цифровых пространствах, где проявление идентичности становится гибким и перформативным.

Rəyçi: filologiya üzrə fəlsəfə doktoru Leyla Cumayeva