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The various voices of national identities: a new method for the research of ethnic relations

Abstract

Border regions are often inhabited by people who in terms of their language and culture rather belong to the nation on the other side of the border, then to the majority nation of their own country. As the borders moved over the last centuries in Europe several times there are many ethnic groups who „get stuck on the other side" finding themselves in a minority status. In this situation while being influenced by the cultural and political system of the majority nation of their own country these ethnic minority groups are still trying to maintain the culture and language of their motherland. But what do the members of these groups consider to be their home and how do they perceive the region where they live?

Our contribution intends to show methodological approaches which can help us to understand the relation of ethnic minorities to the region where they live as well as to reconstruct the terms and labels used by them to describe their home and homeland. In order to get ecologically valid/naturalistic results, but in the meanwhile remain effective in retrieving data we have to conduct focus groups. Focus groups in our understanding are a useful method to obtain certain thematically focused discourses such as the denotative and connotative meaning of places or the place-identity as a constituent of the group identity (Proshansky). Undoubtedly data derived from focus groups are more artificial than everyday discourse, however we believe that by approaching the topic indirectly and with appropriate associative tasks we can still generate a good „semi-everyday discourse".

We will show our methodological approach in a research conducted on the members of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, where we tried to reconstruct the identity work as it is manifested in and through their discursive acts. According to the social construction of self (given by James and Mead as I and Me) the identity is not given but created partly by self-definition, and partly by definition given by others. As the

construction process can be taken as a discursive process (Harré), based on meaningful acts thus the identity constructed during a discourse connects persons to their own groups (i.e. theory of social identity - Tajfel and Blackwell). In our paper we will present what kind of place-related discourses and narratives are performed by our participants and how our discourse oriented method makes it possible to identify and explore various voices (Bakhtin) regarding the place identity among the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. We are convinced that by reconstructing the relation of ethnic minorities to the places and regions where they live we can overcome the conflicts created by the different political and administrative bodies and misunderstandings stemming from different cultures.

Introduction

The task of the present paper is to provide an overview of our developing approach to the study of identity relying on the „semi-everyday" discourse of members of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. Our paper stems from a project which seeks to describe and understand the ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia. We are interested in various aspects of identity, thus we seek to understand the details, content, and tensions between different layers of identity, if there are any. In the present study we will analyze discourse obtained from focus groups. However, other related studies will rely on other material, including social media or political communication.

During our paper we will try to: (1) shortly present the subject group of our research – the Hungarians living in Slovakia - and explain why are they interesting for our interpretative approach; (2) explain why we consider the focus group method as a useful tool to obtain raw material about specific type of discourses, and show the general design of our research as well as (3) summarize the conceptual and theoretical background of our research. Finally, with the help of our discourse-oriented approach (4) we will examine some sections of the conservations of one of the tasks which the participants had during our focus groups, namely: where they had to plan a trip for a visitor from abroad which in their opinion is the best possible one-week program to learn about their culture.

In this part we will try to reconstruct the identity work performed by the participants of our focus groups paying particular attention to those sections where it is perceptible that the various political stances have an impact on shaping their identity.

The brief history of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia

Let us briefly say a few words about who are the subject group of our study: the ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia. The territory of Slovakia was part of the Hungarian Empire before the I. WW. The number of Hungarians in Slovakia was 650 thousand at the time, but it fell to 456 thousand people according to the latest surveys in 2017, which is about a 30% population decline. At present, the Hungarians represent 8.4 percent of the total population.   The Hungarian minority living in Slovakia until the end of the First World War did not form a separate unit, even at the administrative level from the Hungarian nation, unlike the Hungarians in Romania, or Serbia. In general, such national minorities have two strategies if they want to keep their collective national identity which is different from the national identity of the majority (Ravasz 2013). One is a sort of standoffish logic that seeks to minimize the impact of the majority culture on the minority, denies the already existing effects made by the majority, and operates as a kind of a reservation. The other logic calls for openness, and it believes that the minority should reflect on its own diversity, which distinguishes them from the others and treats it as a value.

The so-called *reservation logic* reflects a rigid identity concept, where the goal is the preservation of the national identity, which must be kept at all costs. The users of the strategy attach great importance to keeping traditional values, beliefs and national symbols in order to maintain their identity. Contrary, other cultures and symbols are categorically rejected.

Reflection logic, on the other hand, is derived from the flexible meaning of identity as its name indicates, it reflects/responds to different cultural impacts and it is continuously reproduced in accordance with the dynamics of the identification. The strategy does not only ask the minority to get in touch with another culture, but also to reflect on their own culture, find the relevant differences, and integrate them to their own identity in order to maintain their own collective minority identity.

Due to the current minority status of the Hungarians in Slovakia, and the fact, that the two above mentioned competitive strategies were adopted by different Hungarian political parties throughout the history, and still represent the sharpest line of political

differences - between the more conservative party which prefer the reservation logic, and the more liberal party, which prefer the reflection logic - there is still a lot of identity work ongoing on an individual and collective level as well, which appear in their everyday discourses and thus they are an ideal subject group for our discourse oriented research.

The focus groups and their preparation for analysis: the general design of our research

In the present study we will analyze discourse obtained from focus groups. This section will briefly describe our methodological stance of our study and makes explicit the way of data generation our research relies on.

We decided to work with focus groups. Why focus groups? Because it is a relatively natural way of collecting discourse that is thematically oriented or focused to specific issues the research is directed to. Furthermore, the participants of a lively focus group offer different point of views on the debated issues, therefore making available for detailed analysis of the relevant lay conceptualizations just like the participants' related personal involvement.   Of course data gathered from a focus group is more artificial than everyday discourses, but it is a more efficient way to obtain such data, less time-consuming and it still provides us with a good so-called „semi-everyday discourse".

We designed our research in order to gather semi-everyday discourses of Hungarians living in Slovakia. We did not want to involve our subject in a direct question and answer type of conversation regarding their ethnic identity such as a questionnaire or a more strict interview example. Rather, we wanted to have an access to their own way of formulating and debating the relevant issues. Thus, we intended to provoke discourse segments which will be somehow related to their national, ethnic and regional identity, and perhaps also will reflect the two above-mentioned logics of maintaining their own collective national identity.

In the light of these concerns we have recruited politically active people who are somehow connected to the two main Hungarian political parties in Slovakia, from which one of them is a more conservative party who on the basis of their political program prefer the reservation logic in order to maintain their national identity; and one of them is more liberal, who can be linked to the reflection logic based on their programs. Thus we have two liberal and two conservative focus groups.

Furthermore, in order to have comparable focus groups with similar socio-demographic characteristics our participants are from the Millennial generation between the age of 20-32, who are university students or already have completed their university studies. As politics in Slovakia is still a male dominated occupation our focus group participants are mostly men, however at least one woman in every focus group was present. In order to capture further identity layers of our participants beyond ethnic and political identity constituents our participants were recruited from different regions of Slovakia.   Members of one of the focus groups connected to each political parties are from Western Slovakia, and one from Eastern Slovakia in order to provide a possibility of different regional identities if there are any to occur in the discourses.

The guideline of the focus groups contained six main tasks, for example various word association games, which help us to generate identity-related texts. We discussed topics such as sports, home and homeland,or they had to plan a one week trip for students from abroad – and this task will be more carefully examined during this paper.

There was a moderator, who quietly tried to direct the conversation with the help of the activities, and intervene the discourse only if it's necessary, as to push back the conversation towards the relevant topic. Although we do not believe a full neutral stance of the moderator is possible, we have tried to take a restrained stance, applying mainly indirect methods for guiding the conversation.

We have recorded the focus groups by camera and dictaphone in order to prepare accurate transcriptions and catch the non-verbal aspects of the discourses as well. Our examples below are all from the transcripts of certain sections of focus group discussions.

Conceptual and theoretical background of our research

Identity and discursive identity

Identity of a person in our understanding is not something given, but it is created partly by the person through self-definition, and partly by definition given by others. A parallel historical formulation of social construction of self was given by the pragmatist James (James 1891). These insights were further articulated by Mead (Mead 1934) as I and Me. His ideas, sometimes referred to as symbolic interactionism, openly or covertly keep influencing sociologists and social psychologists till now.

A related contemporary formulation of the construction process of the identity claims that identity is created by meaningful acts or discursive moves of social actors

(Harré & Moghaddam 2003). Furthermore, we contend that identity connects persons to their own groups as proponents of theory of social identity (for example Tajfel and Blackwell) maintain.

Space, place and place-identity

In the current paper we will analyze sections of conservations from the task where the participants of our focus groups had to plan a trip for a visitor from abroad - either from Hungary or from some other country - which in their opinion is the best possible one-week program to learn about their culture. As a result we consider it important to say a few words about how the places appear in the identity, and to clarify a few conceptual differences.

Space endowed with human significance becomes a place (Canter 1977), which is sometimes called place-identity and considered to be a part of our identity (Prohansky 1978; Prohansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983). There are many reasons why some places can be important for someone and for what reasons they appear in the identity. It might be a personal one, but most often it is a community cause - as it's related to group membership, it's part of the collective memory, or a tradition.

We believe that places judged worthy to show to a visitor during our task are significant, meaning-laden places. An outside observer can judge that to be visited places are parts of the speaker's place-identity: attributed place-identity. An explanation of significance of specific places (to visit) could mention or imply various reasons, including significance for a group/community, due to the place's role in collective memory: member's own manifestation of place-identity

Strategies for reconstructing discursive identity

How can we open up and reconstruct people's identity grasped in the dialectic of action and happening through their own linguistic conduct, or through their discourse? In order to reconstruct identity from its occurrence and realization in the discourse, we will turn to some conceptual distinctions devised in speech act theory, which was described in detail in a previous work (Bodor 2012). The participants' contributions to a discourse can be taken as moves or utterances. For analytical reasons we will follow Searle (Searle 1969) in differentiating between the propositional content and illocutionary force of an utterance.

"In the thematic analysis – following the analogy of speech act theory and corresponding to the distinction between propositional content and illocutionary force – we will concentrate on the propositional content, or in short on the content occuring in the discourse." (Bodor 2012:130) Note that this type of investigation of identity is perhaps the most cultivated kind in sociology and social psychology. In typical research of this type it is primarily the analyst who interprets the speaker's speech as identity information. In other terms, in researches of this type the speakers' meaning of the relevant terms or sigs are rarely scrutinized, and the actual relationship what the subject him/herself creates between the subject's group membership (for example, nationality) *vis a vis* the evaluated content (for example, a typical food of the given nation) is not proved by the sociologist, but rather presupposed. The analysts during the thematic analysis consider the meaning as independent of context, and they take for granted that the investigated and the investigator share the same meanings. Studies based on surveys or interviews that ask their participants who belongs to a particular group such a nation on their relationship and evaluation of symbols (such as national flag or hymn), achievements (sport, science) or other stereotypical characteristics of the given nation like kitchen, attractiveness of people or natural beauties, etc. are examples for this strategy of investigation.

On the other hand Discourse-oriented analysis, aims rather to reconstruct performative aspects of a given discourse section. In other words, it aims to reconstruct the identity work performed by the speakers and it is primarily directed on how the speakers said what they said. This strategy attempts to recruit and mobilize both historical/inter-textual and contextual information in reconstructing what the speakers meant. "Furthermore, following the distinction Austin drew between primary and explicit performative, we will differentiate between the primary (or implicit) and explicit linguistic realization of the speakers' identity." (Bodor 2012: 131)

Implicit or presupposed knowledge lies behind the kind of identity work performed by primary (or implicit) identives. In other terms, it's a tacit self-positioning of the speaker. The researcher while reconstructing this perspective during the analysis tries to crawl of how the speakers positions himself with regards to the topic at hand and what identity claims his conduct is directed toward or implies.

In Explicit identity work on the other hand is indicated with the use of the pronoun „we", the corresponding verb conjugation and the first person plural. It may play a crucial role in conceptualizing and studying identity and „collective identity" (Kantner 2006). "By

using appropriate indexical signs the speaker makes it clear to her/his interlocutors – and to the occasional analyst, as well – that s/he is claiming or attempting to achieve some kind of identity." (Bodor 2012: 132)

A sample analysis: How does politics shape the discursive identity

As it was mentioned before in the following section we will analyze some sections of the conservations. Specifically we concentrate on talk appeared during the tasks which the participants had to work on during our focus groups, namely: where they had to plan a trip for a visitor from abroad. They were asked to put together a program which in their opinion is the best possible one-week program to learn about their culture. We have selected parts of the text that reflect the identity strategies used by our focus group participants recruited from the two Hungarian political parties in Slovakia that we mentioned above. We will present two excerpts from the discussion of the "liberal" party (Excerpt 1 and 2.) , and two excerpts from the conversation of the "conservative" (Excerpt 3. and 4) party. In these text segments we will show how the *reflective logic* was displayed by explicit and implicit identity claims, and how claims for the *reservation logic* could be detected. At the same time we will point out how these strategies interweave with other identity-forming logics (as different levels of regional identity) and how the speakers positioning themselves in the discourse against "other groups", how they create their in-groups vis a vis specific out-groups.

Excerpt 1:

The group of the "liberal" party that hosted a Non-Hungarian guest, included Vienna, Prague and Pest in their program. In the following section we are looking at their explanation given to the moderator. . The other subgroup also joins the conversation as well.

(Non-Hungarian   subgroup: S1,S2,S3,   Hungarian   subgroup: S4,   S5, Mod=Moderator)

Mod: Why Prague and Vienna? Or Pest?

S1: **Well, it's our region**

Mod: The surrounding region?

S2: **Well, yes, yes.**

S1: They are more "*party cities"*.

Mod: But because they are *"party"*, or because?

S3: I actually ((choose these cities for the reason)), I said this point. I actually chose these cities, I thought.. how was it written there? So it is **Pest, Vienna, Prague and Bratislava**, so **all four of the cities that are important to me**. **I do not feel like a Czech, er Czech citizen, nor do I have any Czech consciousness, or anything similar. But these are the cities I think historically**

S4: **they are connected**

S3: **they are connected and they are connected to us as well**. And **in order to know this little minority**, if this was the topic, so if we are looking forward to them, **then these belong to us as well**.

Mod: So it helps you to - for example to show your own Hungaro-slovakian culture? You think it's part, an important part of it?

S3: That's right, by all means, by all means

S5: Sure

S2: Yes

As you can see, right in the beginning of this excerpt we have an explicit identity claim, as an answer to the question of the moderator in which the capital of some of Slovakia's neighboring countries, "*Prague … Vienna … (and) Pest*" are mentioned. Speaker S1 said "*Well, it's our region*" referring to the cities of Vienna, Prague and Pest. With the

first person plural the speaker S1 has not only an identity claim for herself, but also a claim for a collective identity of her group. She leaves the national framework and claims for a kind of transnational regional identity, which, considering cities, may be a central European regional identity. This identity claim is immediately confirmed by the speaker S2 ("*Well, yes, yes*".). Speaker S3 joins the conversation as well and starts to explain why she had chosen these cities to visit. She starts with an explanation, that these are "*all four of the city's which are important to me*". However she immediately clarifies that she does not identify herself as a Czech, which is a clear positioning of herself against "another group", an out-group. Showing these cities is for a reason that "*they are connected and they are connected to us as well.*" This is once again an explicit identity claim performed by using appropriate indexical signs of the first person plural. With this claim she makes it clear that although she do not identify herself as a czech on a national, ethnic level, but it is part of her identity in another respect; the layer of her regional (transnational) identity should not be mistaken by her not being and feeling Czech - that is being a member of an outgroup vis a vis being Hungarian. Furthermore she continues that "in order to know this little minority" referring to the Hungarians living in Slovakia, it is important to show them different aspects or layers of their identity, which are "played" at the same time and can not be separated.

Excerpt 2:
At the end of the same discussion: the other subgroup from the same focus group of the "liberal" party, which hosts an imagined Hungarian guest, refers back to the program of the subgroup who hosted the non-Hungarian guest.

(Hungarian subgroup: S4, S5, Non-Hungarian subgroup: S2, Mod=Moderator)

S4: Yeah! But I agree (pointing to the other group) that one, if an American comes ((here)), **in order to understand the Hungaro-Slovakian consciousness**, if it exists at all, then s/he **have to see the cities that were in the ((Austro-Hungarian)) Monarchy together with Bratislava**.

S2: Mhm (agrees with him/her)

S5: Well, Prague does not belong to it ((Hungarian Empire)), but **there are our brothers.**

S4: But Vienna, and Budapest belongs to it.

S5: I know, only the people from Prague (pause) they are the Slovakians, **the brothers, brother in-laws of the Slovakians from the Hungaro-Slovaks**, and **the Austrians are the brothers, brother in-laws of the Hungarians**. So it's two of us, we're all buddies. (Claps his hand) So.

S4: No, it can not be so separated. Not long ago (pause), they did not draw the borders long ago.

Later in the discussion they refer back to the section of text from the Excerpt 1. Speaker S4 agrees that "*in order to understand the Hungaro-Slovakian consciousness*" a foreigner who is not familiar with the region "*have to see the cities that were in the ((Austro-Hungarian)) Monarchy together with Bratislava*". Opposing the previous excerpt here the Speaker S4 not only refers to the importance of the regional context, but by mentioning the Hungarian Empire also draws attention to the historical context. In response to this Speaker S5 draws attention to the fact that Prague was not part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so he believes that the historical analogy said by the Speaker S4 was not exactly accurate. However the Czechs are still connected to us, as they *"are our brothers"*. With this he is referring to the saying that "Slovaks are brothers of the Czechs", which implies that he identifies themselves (at least partly) as Slovaks, as he is using first person plural. Later he explains that his ethnic identity is not only Hungarian, but it's - in our terminology - layered, and that the Slovak part/layer from their Hungaro-Slovakian identity is connected to the Czechs. At the same time the Hungarian part of his identity is connected to the Austrians, referring to the saying that the "Austrians are brother-in-laws of the Hungarians." With this presupposed knowledge about the "kinship-ties" of the four nations he implicitly claims for a layered ethnic identity. Therefore he does not exclude the majority nation from his identity, rather he reflects and integrates some part of it to his own. In our understanding it corresponds to the features of the reflection logic we described above.

Excerpt 3:

In the focus group of the "conservative" party one of the subgroups was presenting their plan for the trip, while a member of the other subgroup interjected.

(Hungarian subgroup: S7, Non-Hungarian subgroup: S6)

S6: Day Three: **Bratislava**, sightseeing. **Well, that would not be such a big sightseeing on my part**: the old town, the castle and the castle in Devín.

S7: **Well, there could be a lot to see there too**.

S6: Yes, it could be, but

S7: **The horse of Svatopluk up in the castle**. (he is **smiling while saying that, after which they start to laugh, but try to suppress it**)

Right in the beginning of this section we can see a use of an implicit identive when the speaker S6 is implicitly (not openly) denying the significance of the Slovak capital Bratislava (together with its monuments, etc.), as he is saying that "*it would not be such a big sightseeing*" on his part. Although immediately after this it seems that the speaker S7 tries to oppose it while saying that *"there could be a lot to see there too"*, it soon turns out that it will not be the case. Right after the seemingly opposing statement he mentioned the horse of Svatopluk in the Castle of Bratislava which is followed by a non-verbal, but very clear discursive tool: "smiling while saying it", and "laughing", which makes it clear that is was just a mocking comment, a joke. To understand why they were mocking it, it's important to know the context. The castle in Bratislava is a significant historical place for the Hungarians, and a lot of them saw the installation of the Svatopluk sculpture in 2010 as a provocative Slovak nationalist aspiration. They are arguing that there is no historical proof, that Svatopluk, the ruler of Great Moravia and who is occasionally been presented as a "Slovak King" had anything to do with the castle in Bratislava, and they believe the installation of the sculpture serve just for the expropriation of the place of their hungarian national identity. With this discursive act the symbols of the Slovak "other" culture and history are rejected, and thus their discursive utterance follows the reservation logic.

Excerpt 4:

In the same focus group of the "conservative" party at the end of the discussion the moderator asked the participants: what do they think, who would this program represent the best, or give a good picture about?

(Non-Hungarian subgroup: S6)

S6: Well, I think about **us, the „Csallóköz-ians"** ((Csallóköz is a region mostly inhabited by Hungarians in the southwest of Slovakia)) Well, **I don't know if Slovakia can give too much impression for a foreigner**… I mean **Bratislava is the capital, so it's a must**. But such **places as Komárno, Dunajska Streda and Somorín are important for me**. So it can give you a little taste of **our culture**.

Similarly to the previous excerpt the Speaker S6 is indirectly and implicitly (not openly) devaluating Slovakia, while he says that he "*don't know if Slovakia can give too much impression for a foreigner*". He even explains that he would show Bratislava just for the reason that it is the capital of Slovakia, "*so it's a must*" to show it to any foreigner who would come to visit. However, opposite to Bratislava there are significant, meaning-laden places as Komárno, Dunajska Streda and Samorín which are places of their regional "Csallóköz" identity. In the end of the text they explicitly confirmed that these places are a part of their collective culture/identity, and they can give a little taste about it to someone who would visit them.

Concluding remarks

In the current paper we have tried to describe briefly the conceptual background and certain empirical aspects of our approach to the study of identity relying on the „semi-everyday" discourse of members of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. We hope that by the sample analysis that we have provided we have managed to show some advantages of considering identity as realized through ongoing live discourse. There are at least three major advantages of considering and studying identity in and through its discursive realization.

(1.) *Dynamic*, partly actor, partly other initiated *aspects of identity* can be highlighted by scrutinizing its discursive details. In this way an emerging active concept of identity could be exposed to analysis as opposed to its static conceptualization. Consequently, identity can be captured as an intricate dance of denial of certain identity

aspects and claims for some other identity constituents. The more rigid versus more flexible realization of this process might correspond to the two strategies for maintaining collective minority identities.

(2.) Insofar one considers identity as something accomplished in and through discourse its complex multi-layered nature can be investigated empirically. It permits us to reflect and analyze various aspects and constituents of identities. These identity constituents could be even fragmented (as regional, national identity) and are played at the same time.

(3.) And last but not least, by interpreting the speaker's identity-talk by an inside "emic" (Pike, 1967) perspective, and scrutinizing the different identity relevant meanings of the relevant terms and signs, our approach allows us to explore the ambiguities within the person's social identity. In this way, multiply group memberships, their nested nature and even their definitions against various out-groups can be reconstructed empirically.

As our research is still ongoing we hope that with further data analysis we can refine our approach and create a usable model for the study of identity on a discursive level.

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