"Homelang" or how to live in a language

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Abstract

The society we are living in is the society of a simple click that opens the world, breaks the barriers and gives access to any type of information no matter time or space. Today, we can live, without any problems, in almost any language. It depends on the person's interest and willingness to live in a certain language. The study aims at placing the term "home" in a close connection with the term "language" by determining whether the word is the only house that we have and accepting that language is a continuously changing and lifelong battlefield.With the help of metaphors (living metaphor, distance metaphor, mother metaphor, birth and family metaphor, etc.) that are among our principle tools for understanding the construction of linguistic, social and political reality, we have tried to conduct a double levelled research: on one side, the paper aims to identify the identity framework of living in a language (as a mother tongue, as a regional language – dialects, as a national language or official language, as a foreign language learning – which undoubtedly implies foreign culture learning by increasing awareness and developing people's curiosity towards the target culture and their own, and, of course, helping people to be able to make comparisons among cultures or as a European language according to the Common European Framework for Foreign Languages which provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks across Europe or as a lingua franca). On the other side, the paper aims to highlight the fact that there are also risks related to the language leaving phenomenon. We live in a language in different ways, but at the same time, for different reasons, people are tempted to leave the language: immigration, high-tech effects, etc. Living in a language vs. leaving a language interfere and the two phenomena still raise questions among researchers and linguists.

Keywords: *language living, language learning, language leaving, identity framework, conceptual metaphor*

1. Introduction

Living in a language has become a challenging and debatable issue in the last decades due to some important factors: technology development, internet usage, online/virtual communication, unlimited and unrestricted access to any type of information, no matter time or space, the directives of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), cross-cultural and media studies, generation gaps. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned factors that have changed the way in which people live in a language, it's logical to ask ourselves *How do we live in a language? Which are the livable levels of a language?* and *Where to in the future?* Therefore, this paper aims to provide answers to these critical questions based on a double levelled research which emphasizes, on one side, the ways in which people live in a language or in more languages at the same time and, on the other side, the potential risks speakers are exposed to when they leave the language/languages, without effectively being aware of this phenomenon. Any language is a continuously changing and lifelong battlefield. Learning a language and living in it involve a pathway with enduring misunderstandings that arise principally when there is a clash that has to

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be overcome. From pronunciation to basic vocabulary, from grammar to pragmatics, from competence to performance there is a long way with ups and downs, be it a mother tongue, a non-native language or a foreign one. Living in a language requires a lot of skills that each speaker needs to possess: a good linguistic background (namely, grammar and vocabulary), good knowledge and experience of how to handle and functionally use the language resources (discourse, interpersonal communication strategies, conversation management) and also the ability of activating the knowledge and using it effectively in social, cultural or international contexts.

2. Literature

The society we are living in is the society of a simple click that opens the world, breaks the barriers and gives access to any type of information no matter time or space. The contact between cultures and civilizations, the globalization forces that are here to stay and the massive migration phenomenon have led to a profound change into the linguistic patterns and the linguistic contact. Today, we can live, without any problems, in almost any language. It depends on the person's interest and willingness to live in a certain language. It is the case of so many writers who decided to drop their own mother tongue and switch to a foreign language (in case of Romanian writers and philosophers it is worth mentioning Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu, Mircea Eliade or the world-wide recognized writers like Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Salman Rushdie or Milan Kundera).

The metaphor *language as a house of being* is not a new concept. Briefly, the concept has been debated since ancient times by Aristotle who considered that the language is the basics of any society, by Humboldt (2008) who strongly believed that the human being weaves himself through language, but the metaphor as it is, was strongly activated by Martin Heidegger. According to the German philosopher (Heidegger, 1983) the human being is the only creature who is allowed to live and build his/her living both in space and time as compared to animals that look for a shelter or just hide themselves. Heidegger states that each language is unique and it is the house of a specific vision of the world that makes it unique as compared to other visions of the world rendered by other languages. He also pointed out that the language is, to a certain extent, the external manifestation of a people's spirit.

When cultures collide, languages connect and interfere leading to a phenomenon with its own riches, the exploration of which could yield incalculable benefits for us, both in terms of wider and more profitable policies and activity. People of different cultures share basic concepts but view them from different angles and perspectives, leading them to behave in a manner which we may consider irrational or even in direct contradiction of what we hold sacred. The behavior of people of different cultures is not something willy-nilly. There exist clear trends, sequences and traditions. (Lewis, 2006, p.XVI)

Before moving on to the next stage to emphasize what methodology consists of it would be beneficial to mention the fact that the concept *Homelang* is the result of a strong connection between the concept of home and the concept of language. Few explanations would be recommended.

What do we mean by *home*? According to Chambers Dictionary (2001) definition, a home is a place that is related to one's roots, a place of origin, a safe place. What do we mean by *language*? According to the above-mentioned dictionary, a language is conversation, speech, communica-

tion, verbalizing, expression, rhetoric. These two concepts join their forces to create the homelang, a safe place of origin where the interior monologues, the results of thoughts, of an internalized language, are conducted into words, whether expressed aloud or not. The concept as we have thought about it is an experimental one, based on motivations that mostly come from philosophy, linguistics and didactics. Last, but not least, we shouldn't forget mentioning the fact that when living in a language, as a mother-tongue, as a dialect, as a second language or as a foreign language, we must pass the threshold of it effectively and efficiently.

3. Methodology

One of the most effective tools for understanding the construction of linguistic reality is the cognitive linguistics that highlights the role of the metaphor in the way we think, what we experience as human beings and what we do every day (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since ancient times there have been different philosophical theories with different views on language and metaphor. Plato, for example, in his *Republic* (Plato, 2005) stated the fact that the truth is absolute and the metaphor should be banned as it would blind people's eyes from the objective reality (Cameron & Low, 1999). Moreover, Aristotle strongly believed that the metaphor should be valued positively because with the help of the metaphor people learn and understand things. The classical approaches, valuing the role of objectivity in understanding the construction of linguistic reality were continued during the Romantic period, where objectivity lost its important role from the classical period being replaced with subjectivity, where imagination, more specifically the metaphor seems to gain ground more and more. Along with the development of cognitive linguistics at the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of metaphor came into being as an invaluable tool for deciphering one's experience.

In *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the authors consider that the concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what the system is like. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.4)

The aforementioned studies are an indication that the conceptual metaphor has gained considerable attention from language researchers and philosophers. Having in mind Lakoff's theory regarding the metaphor, we have tried to use and apply his theory into the homelang approach. We have tried to identify, starting from his theory, a number of five conceptual metaphors that describe the homelang process, namely: the living metaphor, the distance metaphor, the mother metaphor, the birth metaphor and the family metaphor. Each one of them encompasses a specific way of living in a language from the mother-tongue and the regional language (dialects) to the national/official language or from a foreign language and a European one to lingua franca.

4. Findings

As we have stated above our main goal is to present how to live in a language by applying the conceptual metaphor theory. There are more possibilities of living in a language; first of all, the conceptual *mother metaphor* applies to living in a language as a mother tongue, as a native speaker. Any mother tongue is our home, an identity, a face, and a destiny. The mother tongue is the language in which you think and you feel and you develop yourself from a spiritual point of view. The mother tongue is alive thinking, the one we owe a great amount of our human qualities and inner thoughts. One's mother tongue becomes, to a certain extent, the so-called *forma mentis* owned by everybody who shares the thoughts in that specific language.

It is the first convention the child learns, our first way to come together with the others. The first steps in education are done through correcting the language mistakes. The child enters the world in the name of the language he has been taught to speak and comes out of the world leaving behind the mark of the language he spoke. While in a foreign country the misspoken language excludes you from the others' community, the language spoken at home is the one that includes you, integrates you and makes you equal to the others. It is the union carriage of society. If you spoil the language, all the rules the society is based on will be disregarded on the model of the spoiled language. (Liiceanu, 2017, pp.106-107)

Secondly, we can live in a language as speakers of certain dialects/sub-dialects/regional language/official language, inside or outside the country's borders. The distance metaphor based on space orientation (in-out/central-peripheral/up-down) might be of real help when explaining how to live in a regional/national language. Orientational metaphors are not metaphors which "structure one concept in terms of another but instead organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.14). Let's take the example of Romanian language. The Romanian language has four dialects: the Daco-Romanian dialect (which is spoken all over Romania, inside the borders of the country, and is the official language), and outside the border of the country there are numerically reduced communities that are still speaking the other three dialects of the Romanian language: the Macedo-Romanian (which is spoken in some parts of Macedonia), the Istro-Romanian dialect (which is spoken in the Istria Peninsula) and the Megleno-Romanian dialect (which is spoken in the northern part of Greece). There has been a sort of a "linguistic battle" due to the fact that there are distinctive phonetical and lexical features that do not diminish the value of each of them separately, but, more than that, contribute to the cultural linguistic richness. It is worth mentioning – as a general rule for all languages – that speakers consider their own dialect, the one they were born with and raised up with as being the standard language version. As a whole, the conclusion is that this phenomenon confirms one more time how powerfully lived is the language spoken at home.

Moreover, from a sociological point of view, the homelang process is of critical importance, because it sets up, in a way, the ground rules that tie up and separate people, not only as individuals but also as members belonging to the same community. Another important aspect is represented by the regional languages, inside the borders of a country, spoken by the minorities. The regional languages are different idioms (that do not include the dialects), distinct from the official language and used by a numerically reduced community in a specific area/region. According to the *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages* (1992, 2018) "the recognition of the regional or minority languages is an expression of cultural wealth" and shows "the respect of the geographical area of each regional or minority language in order to ensure that existing or new

administrative divisions do not constitute an obstacle to the promotion of the regional or minority language in question" (*European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages* 1992, 2018, p.3).

Moreover, a language could be lived in as a foreign language (L2 – second language acquisition). On one side, any language could be a foreign language (taking into consideration the relationship with the Other) or it could be a European language in a multilingual environment. Living in a language as a foreign language is of critical importance nowadays; it's part of all curricula in schools and also in universities. It's *a must* taking into consideration the world we are living in. Only one foreign language is no longer enough. In the Romanian educational system, from the primary school to the high school, pupils have to learn two foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian or Spanish) depending on the highschool's profile.

At university, the situation stays the same: from compulsory foreign language courses to elective ones, from line of studies in a foreign language (Romanian, English, French, Hungarian, German) to Bachelor's Degrees or MA programs or even Ph.D Studies in a foreign language. There is a market demand for professionals in the field of foreign languages. No matter the profile and the area of expertise, there is a foreign languages trend. We live in a foreign language because we have to: studies, workplaces, careers, all these are, to a certain extent, determined be the necessity of learning at least one foreign language. From an educational point of view, living in a language at this level, is standardized by the European linguistic policy and by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

In addition to the first category of learners, there is also a second category of people who are tempted to live in a language for personal matters; according to a survey that I conducted few years ago among foreigners who were willing to learn Romanian as a foreign language at the question what determined you to enroll in a course of language and Romanian civilization, the respondents were separated into two different categories: on one side there were respondents who considered that Romania is different (in a positive way), it has other customs, other coordinates and other cultural landmarks, other landscapes, another architecture (for the respondents who haven't been to Romania before; on the other side, there were respondents who have already visited the country and found out these cultural landmarks and got into contact with them, for these reasons being determined to also learn the language.

There is tremendous demand for all these cultural coordinates, they are willing to find out in the courses exactly what they experienced by themselves, from food, drinks, to traditions, weddings, funerals, that are different (Moldovan & Ghiţan, 2010). Moreover, the living metaphor in such a situation has multiple meanings: so far, we have seen that people could live in a language because they have to, positively forced in a way by the educational system; they could also live in a language because they are willing to do this due to their cultural awareness of a certain language. But there is also another perspective of living in a language due to the migration phenomenon. At this level the language is lived unequally, they are forced to live in a language not because they are willing to do so, but because of financial and social reasons. Looking for a place where to feel fulfilled and satisfied, requires sacrifices, at our level, linguistic sacrifices. These are made differently by the adults, on one side, and by the children, on the other side because in case of immigrants there are two faces of the same coin: the mother tongue and the host language. Adapting to a wholly new society involves a slow and difficult linguistic process in the case of

adults; not everybody manages to feel like home in the host language, because people are culturally rooted in their own mother tongue. The birth metaphor and the family metaphor act as preserving identity sources that keep the adults deeply rooted to their origins.

The house – language is an escape, a place where we rest when we are tired to find the warmth and the mother smell, where we always come back in crisis situation to restore the energy. The speakers who come back to their mother tongue, justify this gesture by saying that they use the language of tiredness. In other words, the mother tongue becomes, similar to a house, the language in which they rest (Platon, 2010).

This phenomenon has implications not only on a linguistic level but also on culture, traditions, cuisine and immigrants' lifestyle. Taking into consideration these situations, we can say that the mother tongue is "a stability anchor" for the people who live and work abroad. As a result of this, immigrants tend to speak both languages, at different levels – the mother tongue at home and the foreign language at the work place, but in most of the cases they will remain outsiders, giving birth to a hybrid language, which is an unsatisfactory combination of the mother tongue and the host language. As far as it concerns children, the situation is different; being born or raised up in a host country, dealing with the host language from an early age, they no longer feel the pressure of being outsiders. They feel and think in the host language, because they are educated in the host language and steadily they lost interest and comfort in the mother tongue. For these children, mother tongue recovery is of high importance. For these children, the living metaphor is a journey in which they have to face and deal with linguistic obstacles. They are exposed to both living in a language and leaving a language. These two phenomena interfere and still raise questions among researchers and linguists.

5. Conclusions

In recent years it has become more and more obvious that successful language living is no longer restricted by the classroom environment mostly due to a lot of factors that we have tried to present in the above lines. Nowadays we are living in a society that is highly shaped by the digital technologies. Today's borders are ideal because they open the door to an unlimited number of cultural horizons and learning how to live in a language turns into a lifelong intercultural adventure that starts from the moment when we meet for the first time the other culture. In the light of the previous findings that we have already referred to, we should conclude that, in addition to advantages of knowing how to live in a language, there are also a lot of risks, that instead of helping us to live better in a specific language, make us more willing to leave that language: overwhelming immigration and exaggerated high-tech usage are just a few of the main reasons that impede living properly in a language.

The immigration phenomenon has become an overwhelming issue in the last years due to massive movements of population from one country to another in a search for a better life. The mixture of languages that these people speak (at home, the mother tongue, at the workplace, the foreign language at different levels of proficiency) impedes proper living in a language. As a result of it, these people cannot live correctly, efficiently and effectively not just in their mother tongue but also in the host language. Barriers to effective living will definitively arise: faulty information, not having enough information, not knowing how to communicate effectively, not understanding accurately the language or culture of the other person, not being able to think ahead, not listening well enough or trying hard enough to make sense of the other's person message.

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When we make linguistic choices, we should be aware that racism and ethnocentrism can find expression in any culturally diverse community. In such a context we are particularly concerned with uses of language which can be interpreted as racist or ethnocentric regardless of the intentions of the writer or speaker. When such a situation happens we should aim to be inclusive, make the language more accessible and ensure that, as far as possible, we should take account of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the wider society. On the other hand, the exaggerated use of high-tech, especially in the case of the young generation, has led to an endangered homelang.

The homelang corruption by/from its own speakers is the result of several factors: lack of reading and well-written books, replacing them with other sources that, grammatically and graphically, spoil the language, the TV with the multitude of programs in which there are a lot of "unauthorized negligence phenomena, not to mention the language corruption in the public space. Last, but not least, there is also a values crisis, manifested by a by a remote-controlled existence dominated by rankings (top 10, top 100, top 300, etc.). This value crisis leads a drift of patterns, culminating in their complete loss, the concept of value being determined by fluctuating criteria that designate value for some people and non-value for others.

The respect for language gradually disappears in press, on television, in institutions, etc. In a nutshell, we have to protect our homelang. There will always be risks but as long as we fight for the house of our inner thoughts, for the word as a founding ontological concept, we can live for a long in a language. Nichita Stănescu (Stănescu, 2003), one of our greatest poets that Romania has ever had, made one of the most touching description of the word that has to be lived: "the word is not a memory, the word is the treasury of some scattered people, the word is the constitution of a nation, the word is our only home, if we have a home. Otherwise, the landscape is noble, and death is worthwhile to forget" (Stănescu, 2003, p.859). That's the way in which we should live in a language; in an authentic way and with the modesty of the expressed thought.

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