



SIBBOLETH OR SHIBBOLETH: A DISCURSIVE DENIAL OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT: *The incident in the biblical story of Judges 12:5-6 provides some insight into people's enactment of identities. According to the biblical account, forty-two thousand people lost their lives because they were unable to appropriate a linguistic form that would identify them as non-enemies. The study aimed to explore identity construction in the shibboleth story by performing a textual analysis of the biblical passage (Judges 12:5-6) containing the incident, within the framework of identity theory and social identity theory. Social identity enactments and responses were found to be factors responsible for turning the Gileadite and Ephraimite ethnic groups into social categories. The use of pronunciation tests to determine the fate of individuals in the matter of life and death was critically examined within the theoretical frameworks. The study demonstrates how dominant groups weaponize phonetic variation to enforce rigid social categorizations and enact fatal out-group exclusion.*

KEYWORDS: Identity enactment, identity theory, social identity theory, Gileadites, Ephraimites.



INTRODUCTION

Darquennes and Vandenusche (2011) note that language and religion as fields of study are developing areas in Sociolinguistics. They agree with other scholars (e.g., Fishman, 2006, cited in Darquennes & Vandenusche, 2011) that not much scholarly attention had been given to it within the previous forty years. Darquennes and Vandenusche trace the development of “language and religion” in sociolinguistics studies from 1953 to their own volume, *Sociolinguistica*, in 2011. Notable figures in the field ranged from Einar Haugen to Joshua Fishman, William Stewart, Charles Ferguson, William Samarin, and Tope Omoniyi. Within the mass of literature over the period, Darquennes and Vandenusche (2011) identified two existing frameworks that demarcated the growing body of studies in the field. One was presented in Sawyer and Simpson’s (2001) *Concise encyclopedia of language and religion* (cited in Darquennes & Vandenusche, 2011) and the other was developed by Spolsky (2006 cited in Darquennes & Vandenusche, 2011) containing six and four sections respectively. The sections were a classification of the different topics in the literature according to themes.

Darquennes and Vandenusche (2011) then developed their own framework for the contributions that made up their *sociolinguistica*. This framework had four thematic categories: *The anthropology of language and religion*; *Meanings and uses of religious language*; *The role of religion in language standardization and language spread*; *The relationship between language and religion as markers of identity*. Our present study may fit under the last category, as it deals with the discursive construction of identity in a religious text. However, while the contributions under the section discussed the interface between language and religion in constituting ethnic identities, the present study differs by analysing how language is used to perform ethnic identities in a biblical account of a historical incident. A more appropriate category for our study would have been *linguistic analysis of religious texts*. Many recent studies, as discussed below, may fit under such a category.

Analysing a biblical or religious text is a common practice in scholarly works of recent times. Awuku (2018: 3) states, “The Bible can be considered a source of linguistic data.” As part of her research purpose, she wanted to, “increase awareness of some grammatical aspects of the Bible and draw attention to the Bible as a readily available corpus for linguistic investigation” (Awuku, 2018: 6). She did a transitivity analysis of Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, which can be found in Mathew’s Gospel, chapters 5, 6, and 7. She cites Graber (2001) who has also analysed the *Parable of the Sower* in Mathew, chapter 13 using systemic functional grammar. Adjei, Ewusi-Mensah, and Logogy (2016) also did a stylistic analysis of the *Beatitudes* in Mathew, chapter 5: 1-11. Adjei et al., were looking for Style in religious discourse. The present study will also perform a textual analysis of the *shibboleth* incident in Judges, chapter 12: 5-6 to demonstrate a discursive construction and/or denial of identity.

The story

5 And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was *so*, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, *Art* thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; 6 Then said they unto him, Say now *Shibboleth*; and he said *Sibboleth*: for he could not pronounce *it* right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand (Bible, King James Version, Judges 12: 5-6).



The above story has attracted quite some attention from language scholars (e.g., Dalamu, 2017; Leone, 2009; McNamara, 2005, 2020) because of its presentation of language as a test for ethnolinguistic identity. Perhaps, it is the outcome of the test that makes the story significant and of interest to scholars, as it highlights some uses to which language may be put in different situations. Another likely attraction of the story is that the *Shibboleth* incident has been repeated through history during wartime and in other contexts such as the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide (McNamara, 2020). So keen is the interest in this story that the contemporary English term *shibboleth* lends its origin to the incident in this story (Leone, 2009).

The original Hebrew meaning of the word *shibboleth* is literally “an ear of grain” or “torrent of water.” The meaning was not at issue during the test; rather, the phonetic realisation of the word-initial consonant was different for the two ethnic groups, Gileadites and Ephraimites. While the Gileadites realized the initial consonant as a voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ (sh), the Ephraimites realized it as a voiceless alveolar fricative /s/. The two forms of pronunciation were a general linguistic difference between the Gileadites and Ephraimites (Leone, 2009: 136). The Gileadites found themselves in a position of power over the Ephraimites after defeating them in a civil war and decided to use this linguistic difference as a test for identifying the Ephraimites for execution.

Dalamu (2017: 262) explains that *Shibboleth*, as an English lexeme, becomes a concept which draws a distinction between two communities and could be a “slogan, cliché, dictum, catchword, aphorism, motto, maxim, and catchphrase”. Awonusi (2007: 47) observes, “The word shibboleth has been used in many languages for any peculiarity of pronunciation which is an index to a person’s origin” (cited in Dalamu, 2017). *Shibboleth* tests have been used often as instruments of social policy, and scholars have documented awareness of a long tradition of using language tests similar to the biblical *shibboleth* to identify insiders and outsiders during serious intergroup conflicts (McNamara, 2005).

Language proficiency tests are a disguised *shibboleth* used by powerful in-group members to identify and cause harm to those perceived as out-group members. Such tests are often used to label persons who are targeted to be denied essential freedoms, rights, and privileges such as immigration, education, healthcare, residence, citizenship, jobs, and asylum (Leone, 2009; McNamara, 2005; Shokeen, 2020). The assumption of the *shibboleth* tests is that persons who are unable to speak a certain language in a certain way are not nationals or citizens of that language’s domain. Leone (2009) argues, however, that the weakness of such language tests is that some natives could get the test wrong while some non-natives could get it right.

Recalling the biblical *shibboleth* incident, Leone (2009) imagines that among the 42,000 persons who failed the test and died that day were likely to be found some non-Ephraimites. It is also highly probable that among those who passed the test and were allowed to cross the Jordan to safety would be some Ephraimites. These possibilities expose the weakness of a *shibboleth* and its current form (language test) as an invalid means of identifying an in-group member from an out-group member.

Though the *shibboleth* story in the Bible has attracted scholarly attention, most studies have not done a textual analysis of the passage. Also, few of them had identity construction as the focus when they engaged the biblical text. What McNamara (2005; 2020), Leone (2009) and other scholars have done is to draw on the story to evaluate the efficacy of using language



tests as a tool for social policy and for including or excluding individuals in social group membership for various purposes. The present study sought to approach the text differently by analysing it for identity enactment. The following research questions were explored:

1. What factors triggered the formation of Gileadites and Ephraimites as social groups?
2. Why would some people deny their identity while others would not, given the same or similar situations?
3. Is a shibboleth test sufficient to determine people's ethnic identity?

Answering these questions provides insight into how individuals in positions of power employ language as a tool of victimisation, and how those in positions of vulnerability also use language as a means for survival in society.

Conceptual lens

This section discusses key concepts in identity theory, social identity theory, and identity construction in discourse. The concepts that shall be discussed below provide a framework for analysing the text that is being considered in this study.

Identities, construction, and discourse

Burke and Stets (2009) define an identity as a set of meanings attached to roles individuals occupy in the social structure (role identities), groups they identify with and belong to (group identities), and unique ways in which they see themselves (person identities).

Moje (2011) observes that identities are considered categories people assign to themselves or others (discursive constructions), stories that people tell about themselves and others, or enactments in particular relationships and positions. The main concern of identity theorists is how multiple identities relate to one another and the relative importance of each identity to the individual in situations (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Moje (2011) proposes that studies must not only look for how people discursively construct identities but also give attention to how people enact identities and how other interactants respond to the enactment of identities. Moje's (2011) proposal points to Stets and Serpe's (2013) concept of identity verification. Identity verification exists when individuals perceive that others see them in a situation the same way they see themselves or want to be seen.

The way other people respond to the enactment of identities is as important as the enactment itself for the success of identity construction. It has been observed that what we say, how we say it, and what language we use to say it are all a way of performing identity. In other words, whenever people use language (or fail to do so), they reveal something about themselves and how they want others to perceive them (Flowerdew & Wang, 2016). However, other people in an interaction do not always perceive or accept what the performer of an identity intends. Hyland (2010: 161) notes that, "our identities are only successful to the extent that they are recognized by others however, and this means employing, appropriating, and transforming existing discourses." Hyland suggests a deliberate social action in the construction of identities which may succeed or fail in relation to other interactants.

The present study accepts the view that identity is something that people do rather than what they have, and individuals assume multiple identities over the course of their lives (Bamberg,



De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011; Burke & Stets, 2009; Zhao & Jones, 2017). This view studies identity as constructed in discourse through discursive activities, “as negotiated among speaking subjects in social contexts, and as emerging in the form of subjectivity and a sense of self”. In this sense, discourse is very important in identity studies, as “construction is deeply embedded in discourse” (Bamberg et al., 2011: 1), and because “identities are shaped by dominant Discourses” (Zhao & Jones, 2017:12).

Zhao and Jones’s (2017) study is of interest to the present study. Their research was about the construction of identities among Chinese women who were in leadership in higher educational institutions. Even though these women were in leadership roles, they strategically avoided to identify as leaders in order to align with societal norms, conventions, and expectations. Women who would do otherwise, would violate powerful historical and cultural Discourses of gender and leadership; and this deviation would be expected to attract repercussions. One of the theoretical points made by the findings of the research is that people are likely to discursively deny or reject certain identities if they perceive some threat towards the enactment of such identities within a hostile context. Alvesson & Billing (2009: 98) affirm, “This is an important finding since the rejection of an identity is an indication of not belonging to a particular social group” (cited in Zhao & Jones, 2017: 12).

The theoretical point above is significant to the present study, because Ephraimite individuals in the *shibboleth* incident discursively rejected their identity to indicate that they did not belong to the group that was targeted for execution. In social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000), the *self* is conceptualised in terms of one’s membership of a social group. A *social group* is a set of individuals who see themselves as possessing similar social attributes compared to a different social category with different attributes. The self is categorised as representing the prototypical attributes of the social group one belongs to. A *social identity*, then, is a person’s awareness of being a member of a social category. Even though people are born into an already structured society, each person’s sense of self is unique because of a combination of unique social identities derived through life experiences (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Stets and Burke (2000) note that people who categorise themselves into the same social group view themselves as the in-group and categorise those who differ as the out-group. Along with this self-categorisation comes social comparison between the in-group and the out-group members. In this comparison, the similarities between the self and the in-group members are emphasised and judged positively, while the differences between the self and the out-group members are emphasised and judged negatively. “This accentuation occurs for all the attitudes, beliefs and values, affective reactions, behavioural norms, **styles of speech...**” among other things (Stets & Burke, 2000: 225, emphasis added). Apart from evaluative judgements, the in-group/out-group categorisation leads to other consequences, such as ethnocentrism (Turner et al. 1987, cited in Stets & Burke, 2000). Regarding the consequences, Stets and Serpe (2013: 56) comment that, “less prototypical members may be more likely to be perceived as a threat because they are not acting in ways consistent with the norms of the category.”

The above concepts are significant to the study because not only is the *shibboleth* incident a case of discursive identity construction, but it also involved identity verification (identity theory) as well as self-categorisation (social identity theory). The Gileadites self-categorised as the in-group and categorised the Ephraimites as the out-group. Furthermore, the in-group



used differences in “styles of speech” to identify the out-group as the enemy in the war situation.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs the qualitative research design as it explores explicit and implicit meanings embedded in a text. The design leans towards the historical approach. In this design, researcher-subject interaction is not required to arrive at findings, and historical records can add important contextual background required to understand and interpret a research problem more fully. Historical sources can be used to study different research problems or to replicate a previous study (Gall, 2007; Savitt, 1980).

The analysis makes use of the textual analysis technique. This is a methodology that is suitable for interpreting texts. Mckee (2001: 3) observes, “When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.” This observation implies that a single text could be subjected to several possible interpretations. This possibility allows a historical text such as a biblical passage to be used over and over to study different research problems. Text analysis is a dominant methodology in media and cultural studies. One of its recent applications was Arya (2020) who used it to analyse a painting, *Tarquin and Lucretia* by Titian and a poem, *In a Station of the Metro*, by Ezra Pound.

Data and Data Coding

The data for analysis is the biblical passage containing the *shibboleth* incident in Judges 12: 5-6. Biblical texts serve as rich, highly structured corpora for sociolinguistic and discourse analysis (Awuku, 2018) and are readily available for linguistic investigation. The passage is selected purposively for its content of the *shibboleth* incident, which underscores an important phenomenon in identity studies.

The text was segmented into functional linguistic units (clauses and phrases) to isolate specific discursive acts, such as interrogatives, commands, and declarations. These units were coded sequentially using the verse number and Roman numerals (e.g., 5(i), 5(ii)). The pieces of information in verse 5 have labels from 5(i) to 5(viii); and those in verse 6 have labels from 6(i) to 6(vi).

Coded data

5(i) And the Gileadites took 5(ii) the passages of Jordan 5(iii) before the Ephraimites: 5(iv) and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, 5(v) Let me go over; 5(vi) that the men of Gilead said unto him, 5(vii) *Art* thou an Ephraimite? 5(viii) If he said, Nay; 6(i) Then said they unto him, 6(ii) Say now Shibboleth; 6(iii) and he said Sibboleth: 6(iv) for he could not pronounce *it* right. 6(v) Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: 6(vi) and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand (Bible, King James Version, Judges 12: 5-6).

This coding style is used because it is systematic, clear, and easy to reference.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Background of the incident

The biblical book of Judges, written about 1050 B. C., is a historical account of a period when individuals known as judges ruled over the nation of Israel. There were no substantive kings over the nation during this period of constant conflict with other nations. During the period, anytime there was a need for a leader to mobilize the people for war, a brave warrior would emerge out of the people to take up the role. Such emergencies almost always culminated in victory for the nation of Israel. In all, there had been twelve judges over a period of three centuries (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown, 1871). Jephthah was one such leader whose story is recorded in the book of Judges 11-12: 7. He led the people of Israel to war against the people of Ammon and defeated them, and later the Gileadite tribe against the Ephraimites in a civil war.

The Gileadites and Ephraimites were social groups

The Gileadites and Ephraimites had co-existed peacefully even though they were different ethnic groups. There was no sense of rivalry between them until some events divided and pitted them against each other.

Excerpt 1

5(i) *And the Gileadites took* 5(ii) *the passages of Jordan* 5(iii) *before the Ephraimites.*

It must be noted that the Gileadites and the Ephraimites were members of the same society: they were both ethnic groups of Israel. However, in the excerpt above, the actions taken by the two tribes (i.e., taking *the passages of Jordan*) were connected by the term '*before*'. This connective suggests a competitive, instead of a complementary, relationship between the actions of the two ethnic groups. The two groups are revealed to be conflicted in their relationship and opposed to each other. According to Social Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000), social groups are not complementary groups. Instead, they are groups opposed to each other, with members of one perceiving members of the other group as negative. This introductory excerpt to the *shibboleth* incident immediately sets forth the two ethnic groups as social groups.

Indeed, the passage being analysed reports the climax of a civil war between the two ethnic groups. Reading a few verses preceding this passage shows factors that triggered the war and probably gives insight into what led to the formation, or rather transformation, of the two ethnic groups into social groups. The Jephthah-led Gileadites had just returned from war after defeating the Ammonites on behalf of all Israel. The Ephraimites faulted Gilead and threatened to burn down Jephthah's house for not inviting them as allies in the war. Jephthah's response, however, shows that they had been invited but were indifferent. The feud between the two ethnic groups escalated into a full war when the Ephraimites taunted that, "*Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites*" (Judges 12: 4, King James Version; italics added). This taunt is a social action that, potentially, puts the two once-united ethnic groups into "we" and "you" social categories. This indeed demonstrates that societies are natural, yet social groups are formed through social action (Stets & Serpe, 2013; Stets & Burke, 2000).



It is worth mentioning that the Ephraimites had a history of engaging in this type of confrontation. Even though the present study is not doing a trend analysis in particular, a deeper dive into the past might widen the context of identity work and provide a clearer understanding of identities at play. Besides, textual analysis technique takes interest in trend analysis as well (Gall, 2007; Savitt, 1980). The study recalls that when Gideon, another judge before Jephthah, had returned from war against Midian, the Ephraimites confronted him over why they were not invited as allies and “*did chide with him sharply*”. Gideon was able to placate them with some explanation, unlike Jephthah (Judges 8:1-3).

Excerpt 2

5(ii) *the passages of Jordan*

The passages of Jordan, the fords of the Jordan or the waters unto Jordan, in other words, seem to have been of great military value at the time. The Jordan River seemed to have been easiest to cross over at those points. Previously, other military campaigns seized the crossing points to gain advantage over the enemy. Ehud, for instance, took control of those crossing points to defeat Moab and execute 10,000 men at that point (Judges 3: 29). Gideon also in his battle against Midian, seized the same passages for advantage against the Midianites (Judges 7: 24). It was probably this strategic nature of *the passages of Jordan* that caused the Gileadites and Ephraimites to compete for its takeover, a competition that the Gileadites won, slaying 42,000 Ephraimites.

The Ephraimites found themselves at the lower position of power

Excerpt 3

5(iv) *and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, 5(v) Let me go over;*

Identity negotiations involve positioning the self within relationships of power (Moje, 2011). The Ephraimites, according to 5(iv), were on the run, having been defeated in the war. Their escape gives them an identity of the powerless, the pursued, whose primary goal has changed from victory to survival. Coming face-to-face with the Gileadites, the powerful, the pursuer, the Ephraimites' utterance in 5(v), ‘*Let me go over*’, in this context, is not a command. It is a plea from someone whose life hangs in the balance at the mercy of the addressee. This is the point of identity performance for survival. But this construction of the self does not seem to work for the Ephraimites, as the powerful other does not accept it.

This is a form of identity non-verification which, according to identity theory, would lead to negative emotions for the individual (Stets & Serpe, 2013). In this particular situation, the goal of the identity performer is not simply to feel good or bad; it is a matter of survival or death. If the identity being invoked leads to verification, the individual lives; if, on the other hand, it leads to non-verification, the individual dies. In this situation, therefore, Ephraimites would not simply feel terrified but would perceive themselves in danger of death. Identity theory admonishes that when there is identity non-verification in a negative direction, as is the case of the Ephraimites, the individuals may need to step up their game to convince the other person to accept the identity being invoked.



The Ephraimites discursively denied their group identity

Excerpt 4

5 (vi) *that the men of Gilead said unto him*, 5 (vii) *Art thou an Ephraimite?* 5 (viii) *If he said, Nay;*

The men of Gilead assumed a position of power over the Ephraimites through conquest and were now ready to determine their fate. To do this, the Ephraimites ought to be identified, but the personal identity presented by the Ephraimites in 5 (v) could not be verified by the Gileadites. In other words, the question “who are you?” was not helpful to identify the Ephraimites. The Gileadites then resorted to a question of group identity by asking, “*Art thou an Ephraimite?*” In other words, “Which group do you belong to?” (5 vii). For obvious reasons, most Ephraimites would choose “Nay”. This would mean a rejection of their identity as belonging to the membership of the Ephraimite group (Alvesson & Billing 2009, cited in Zhao & Jones, 2017).

Individuals from the Ephraimite group who answered the question with a “nay” have rejected their identity and attempted to discursively construct a new identity as non-Ephraimite. They perceived the need to do so because in the situation, their Ephraimite identity was not important to them. In fact, that identity was not beneficial but dangerous since it attracted a consequence of death to the individual who enacted it. This finding aligns with that of Zhao and Jones (2017), that Chinese women in leadership roles rejected their leadership identities for fear of backlash from the gendered society. It appears that some people would discursively minimise, downplay, deny, or reject their identities if the need for safety and survival becomes paramount in a situation. In other words, the nature of a situation would influence which identity becomes prominent or central in the individual’s hierarchy of identities (Stryker & Serpe, 1994, cited in Stets & Serpe, 2013)

On the other hand, some individuals might not deny their identity when that identity is threatened. It should not be assumed that all the Ephraimites would say “Nay” to the identity question. The wording of the data (5(viii) *If he said, “Nay”*) suggests the probability that some individuals did not say “Nay”. Besides, martyrdom through religious and nationalist convictions is common knowledge. If some Ephraimites admitted to their identity by answering “Yea”, they must have been killed without a need for the *shibboleth* test to identify them. Such individuals may have died without considering a denial of their identity in order to escape. Such a stance is reminiscent of three Hebrew boys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refused to deny their nationalist and religious identity in the face of imminent death (The Bible, Daniel 3:16-18).

Pronunciation as a test of identity

The attempt to construct a new non-Ephraimite identity failed because the Gileadites did not accept “Nay” as a sufficient answer to the identity question. This confirms Hyland’s (2010) assertion that our identities are only successful to the extent that they are accepted by others in an interaction. It also shows that how other people respond to the enactment of identities is as important as the enactment itself (Moje, 2011).

The Gileadites did not consider a “yea” or “nay” (5viii) as a satisfactory answer to the question, “Art thou an Ephraimite?” For that matter, they devised a pronunciation test to



depersonalise members of the out-group. In social identity theory, depersonalisation is the act of seeing the self as an embodiment of the social group prototype. The person is seen not as a unique individual but is categorised in terms of possessing prototypical attributes of the social group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through the process of social categorisation, the Gileadites constructed themselves as the in-group and the Ephraimites as the out-group.

Excerpt 5

6(i) *Then said they unto him,*

6(ii) *Say now Shibboleth;*

6(iii) *and he said Sibboleth:*

6(iv) *for he could not pronounce it right*

The test chosen by the Gileadites indicates that even though all the tribes of Israel spoke the Hebrew language, there were linguistic nuances in their speech. The Gileadites chose to let the Ephraimites pronounce “*Shibboleth*” because, in their perception, the Ephraimites “*could not pronounce it right*” (6iv). A question is, who decided which pronunciation was right or wrong? Here is a thing about social group identity formation with its consequent in-group/out-group dichotomy: The in-group members view their own attributes, including speech style, as right, while they perceive those of the out-group members as wrong (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The difference in the two types of pronunciation was the initial consonant of the word. While the Gileadites realized it phonetically as a voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ (sh), the Ephraimites realized it as a voiceless alveolar fricative /s/. The Gileadites used this difference to determine who was an Ephraimite and, for that matter, deserving of death and who was not. Those who were caught through this test were all killed at *the passages of Jordan*. Speech can be used to negotiate identities. It has been found to provide stronger cues than physical features or abilities to make evaluative judgement about people. Language has often been used as a means, especially by those in power, to exclude some and include others (Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2005). Pronunciation style has been alleged to indicate nativity. Studies suggest that unless people are born into and bred within a linguistic environment, their pronunciation almost always differs from native speakers’ pronunciation. “Even children whose age of onset is as young as three years old still are not always wholly native in their pronunciation” (Frost, 2013: 3). The Gileadites seemed to have exploited this aspect of language to administer the *shibboleth* test in the identification of the Ephraimites.

Other studies (e.g., Dauer, 2005) suggest that it is not always an issue of ability or inability to appropriate the “right” pronunciation. Sometimes people struggle with pronunciation because it is closely associated with identity. Some individuals may not want to sound like members of other social groups. “Even in ESL situations, certain students may not want to sound American or Australian or English” (Dauer, 2005: 545). It is likely that those who may not want to deny their identity even in a situation of danger to their lives may also view pronunciation in terms of social identity.



Consequences of failing pronunciation test.

Excerpt 6

6(v) *Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan:*

6(vi) *and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand*

To say that 42,000 persons were killed for failing a pronunciation test would sound outrageous indeed. Of course, we know that the crime of the victims was not actually the failure of the pronunciation test per se. They were victims of war, already marked for death before the test was conducted. The test was only used to confirm the identity of those who had been targeted to die. Language became a weapon used to fight and destroy the enemy. Could it be possible that someone who was not targeted, that is, a non-Ephraimite, could have fallen by the wielding of this weapon? Probably, yes.

Even though pronunciation has been found to have a strong connection to linguistic origins and identities, its reliability to accurately determine the identities of all persons who attempted to cross the Jordan at that time seems questionable. Maybe the modern use of language tests for similar purposes is equally questionable as well. The use of such tests to determine people's fate could be more ideologically than scientifically motivated. Therefore, Leone (2009: 140) argues, "But if language is a mechanism which introduces thresholds more than frontiers and tensions between regularities and irregularities more than rigid discriminations, how can someone be judged either as an insider or an outsider, a citizen or a barbarian, a human or an animal, on the basis of a shibboleth?"

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study explored how Ephraimites discursively denied their identity and attempted to construct a new identity as a strategy to escape death in a war situation. It also examined how the Gileadites used language to construct an enemy identity for the Ephraimites. Three research questions guided the textual analysis of the biblical passage containing the shibboleth incident in Judges chapter 12, verses 5 and 6. The theoretical framework consisted of Identity Theory (Stets & Serpe, 2013) and the Social Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). The findings are summarised and discussed in this section of the paper.

One of the findings was that the Gileadites and Ephraimites were transformed into social groups. Before the civil war, these two were natural ethnic groups of the same national identity as Israelites. Even though they had social differences, such as linguistic differences, those differences were not emphasised, and the two ethnicities coexisted peacefully until shortly before the war. According to identity theory, it is when the differences between groups are compared sharply with intragroup differences being judged positively and intergroup differences judged negatively that social categories or groups are formed. The first research question sought to find out the factors that led to the transformation of the two tribes into social categories, that is, an in-group and an out-group.

The Ephraimites were cast as confrontational and assaultive in their approach to social misunderstanding. This had happened previously with Gideon (Judges 8:1-3), and again with the Jephthah-led Gileadites. Secondly, the Ephraimites projected themselves as verbally



abusive and heckling. They had taunted that the Gileadites were fugitives, that is, outcasts of Ephraim and Manasseh. This taunt seemed to have peaked the tension and drawn the battle lines between the two ethnic groups. To answer the research question, therefore, it appears that the negative social action, in part, of the Ephraimites led to the categorisation of the ethnic groups as in-group and out-group. This is 'in part' because the Gileadites also played a role, without which the outcome would have been different. Identity studies affirmed that enactments are unsuccessful unless other people respond to them (Hyland, 2010; Moje, 2011). In the case of Gideon, for example, it would be recalled that he placated the Ephraimites through peaceful dialogue. However, in the case of Jephthah with the Gileadite, he responded to the actions of the Ephraimites with war. It can be concluded that social categories are formed within the society through the enactments of social identities and responses to the enactments.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the Ephraimites occupied a subordinate power position. According to Moje (2011), since identities are embedded in relationships, they are also embedded in and, at times constitutive of, relations of power. Language is often exploited as a weapon of power to include some and exclude others (Gatbonton & Trofimovich, 2005). The Ephraimites had constructed themselves as the powerless in relation to the Gileadites.

A further finding was that the Ephraimites discursively denied their group identity. They showed that at the threat of death, a denial of their Ephraimite identity could save them. This rejection of identity resonates with findings from Zhao and Jones (2017) that some Chinese women in educational leadership evaded or rejected their identity as leaders. The women were influenced by dominant historical and cultural discourses, which they were expected to enact in order to remain at peace with Chinese society. In the case of the Ephraimites, the identity rejection was necessitated by the fear of death, while in the case of the Chinese women, it was necessitated by the fear of societal resentment.

Though the causes of identity rejection were different in the two cases, they both represent threatening situations. It is, therefore, likely that when identities are threatened, they could be denied or rejected by some individuals. It is, however, not clear why some other individuals would not reject an identity even if it threatens death.

Lastly, it was found that pronunciation was used as a test of identity. The result was that 42,000 persons who failed the test were killed. Studies have shown a close association between pronunciation and nativity and identity (Dauer, 2005; Frost, 2013). This paper argues that pronunciation tests are highly effective, brutal discursive tools used by dominant groups to enforce fatal in-group/out-group boundaries. Several anti-shibboleth researchers have criticised the use of language tests in general for social policy purposes (Leone, 2009; McNamara, 2005; 2020; Shokeen, 2020).

The study is a contribution to theory with implications for further studies. It focused on identity construction in the *shibboleth* story of Judges 12:5-6. While this study provides deep insight into discursive identity denial within a specific historical/religious narrative, future research could apply this dual theoretical framework to contemporary conflict zones where linguistic shibboleths are still utilized to determine in-group/out-group survival.



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