

What's in an Identity?

We speak of identities in many fields, as the myriad articles in this issue plainly show. But what does the word really mean?

As for English, the older, historical meaning of the noun 'identity' is nicely preserved in the related adjective 'identical' – meaning 'the same' (or perhaps we should say, 'virtually the same'). Both English words, indeed, go back to the Latin pronoun 'idem' (the same). To be identical, therefore, is to be the same, or at least perceived as such. And so any two things with identical identities, so to speak, have the same sameness, and are therefore for all intents and purposes in fact the very same thing. Really quite simple, once you give it a little thought.

This older sense of 'identity' in English is likewise preserved in mathematics, for instance, where the 'identity property of multiplication' states that any number multiplied by one is equal to (or identical with) itself: to write $3 \times 1 = 3$ is merely to assert, after all, that that three is precisely three.

In Polish, this conceptual relation between 'sameness' and 'identity' is perhaps more explicit. The noun 'tożsamość' (identity), after all, derives from the Polish 'toż samo' (the very same thing). The latter phrase includes the now somewhat archaic intensifying particle *ż*, whereas nowadays Poles would simply say 'to samo' for 'the same' (as in 'Poproszę to samo' when ordering after someone else at a restaurant, meaning 'I'll have the same'), but be that as it may, both the Polish noun 'tożsamość' (identity) and the adjective 'tożsamy' (identical) are quite transparently related to the idea of things being 'to samo' (the same). Admittedly, through the years Polish lexicographers have not always found very lucid ways to define these words, sometimes even citing examples invoking the Holy Trinity – something that did not necessarily render their definitions any clearer! However, one of the classic Polish dictionaries – known as the 'Vilnius dictionary', from the mid-19th century – defined 'tożsamość' (identity) quite adroitly and astutely as denoting 'a qualifying concept, that the same thing is not a different one,' and 'tożsamy' (identical) as meaning 'entirely the same, altogether not different.' However, it seems that in both English and Polish, the nouns 'identity' / 'tożsamość' have long been gaining currency in a newer, particular sense, one which we owe to psychology. The feeling of 'being the same' is of course very important for our self-awareness, although to tell the truth, the underlying concept might come across like a terrible cliché: anything and

everything that exists, after all, is precisely what it is, which is to say that it is precisely the very same thing that it is. On the contrary, nothing can ever be truly be completely and wholly the same as something else. The key to understanding the psychological notion of 'identity,' therefore, really lies in perceptions: not in whether something is truly the same or different, but in whether it is perceived as such.

In this psychological approach, therefore, one's 'identity' is an internal, subjective perception of oneself as an entity, as an unchanging ego. Such a definition might sound quite metaphysical to the ordinary ear, but the psychological concept nonetheless resurfaces quite naturally and quite often in public discourse, when we adapt it to talk about the world around us. And when we speak of an 'identity' in this sense, we are usually referring to either the awareness that a person or group of people has about its own distinctiveness, or the very existence of such traits that make such a person or group stand out (even if those characteristics are not necessarily consciously realized). We speak about ethnic identities or national identities, and quite often a dose of ideology creeps in here...

When a social group has an identity, that means it is the same as itself, different from others. And when we have our own personal identity, it means we are aware of who we are, and perhaps more importantly, of who we are not. Or, as the late rock musician Frank Zappa once mockingly put it (admittedly stretching the rules of English gram-

mar quite a bit): "You know what you are? You are what you is! ... You ain't what you're not, so see what you got."

From there it is just a short step to the deeply psychologically rooted verbal use 'identify with someone' – to share or be able to understand someone else's feelings or perceptions, or to the socially rooted, passive use 'be identified with something' / 'być utożsamiany z czymś' – to be perceived by others as being essentially the same as something else, and not necessarily in a positive light at that.

And so, as the Vilnius dictionary once put it, the essential idea is here indeed that 'the same thing is not a different one,' although in the broader sense it all depends on who is doing the perceiving – as 'identity' is truly in the eye of the beholder.



We use the word 'identity' frequently in everyday language, but linguistic analysis shows how hard a notion it is to pin down

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