

## A Doctoral Dissertation: Observations and Comments<sup>1</sup>

*Prof. Edward Y. Odisho*

The author of this doctoral dissertation is Domarina Oshana, a resident of Skokie, Illinois. I have known Domarina Oshana– now Dr. Oshana– since 1996 when she was still a sophomore at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) majoring in Psychology. Obviously, as a psychology major student, she had no direct instructional and academic connection with me as an NEIU faculty member. My first direct contact with her was through the activities of the *Annual Student Research and Creative Activities Symposium* when I served as a member of its steering committee. Without any ethnic bias invoked, as an Assyrian professor coming repeatedly across the name of a very young Assyrian lady so passionately interested in research was so academically and intellectually rewarding for me. It is not unfamiliar in our Assyrian community to meet bright students who are academically high achievers, but to have students with a strong urge and orientation for academic research is quite unique. Domarina was truly unique in this respect and it was because of this uniqueness I had a genuine deep respect for her although, at the time, I did not reveal that to her.

Dr. Oshana graduated *Magna Cum Laude* from NEIU in 1998 after which she immediately joined the University of Chicago. She completed her Masters degree in social sciences in nine months. At this stage, she was ready to tackle the requirements of a doctoral degree. She was admitted to the Research Methodology Program of Loyola University Chicago, where she embarked on her studies and research for a doctoral degree. She completed all the requirements and submitted a dissertation titled: “*Cultural Identification, Linguistic Competency, and Religious Participation as Mediating Constructs in the Development of Ego Identity among Assyrian-American Adolescents.*” (207pp, 2003.) She successfully defended her work and received the Doctor of Philosophy degree in December 2003. The fact that her work is dedicated to Peter and Shamiran, Domarina’s parents, is apparently an indication of how much her parents meant to her in her educational progress.

Dr. Oshana afforded me with a copy of her complete dissertation which I read with much curiosity and interest equally blended with pride and delight. I was curious because I wanted to find out what she had put together and what her findings were. As for my pride, it was based on a hidden sensation of seeing a young Assyrian woman who had already several brilliant achievements to her name. My delight in reading her dissertation was because she is an NEIU alumna, where I have been teaching for the last fifteen years, and a graduate of Loyola University of Chicago where I had taught for twenty-one years. Below are some of my observations and comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Domarina Oshana is presently a senior research analyst at the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, Prevent Child Abuse America.

**Purpose and Rationale**

The author states the purpose of her dissertation as: “quantitatively examine and understand ways in which a fundamental process of personality relates to language, religion and cultural identification in a sample of Assyrian-American adolescents; and to qualitatively examine the degree to which these constructs influence ego identity development.” Her rationale is “to contribute to the body of identity research and to develop practical applications for supporting identity development of adolescents in the Assyrian community and in the Chicago area public school system.”

**Research Methodology**

The author interviewed 101 adolescents of first and second Assyrian-American from Chicago area including 37 males, 64 females, ranging in age from 15-20 years, with a mean age of 17.1 years. The measures used in the investigation consisted of: a) Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS-2) developed by Bennion & Adams, 1986; b) Mediating Constructs of Identity Status Survey (MC-IS) developed by the author. This is a survey questionnaire designed for use with Assyrian-American adolescents to measure the constructs of cultural identification, linguistic competency, and religious participation; c) Supplemental qualitative in-depth interview format. Questions pertained to immigration, culture, religion, family background, gender identity, dating and marriage, language, friends, and occupational choice. As for the procedures and data collection, the sessions were scheduled with a purposive and volunteer sample of adolescents recruited from church youth groups and/or Assyrian youth clubs in various Chicago Metropolitan area high schools (urban and suburban) and through contacts from community colleges/universities. The author has been extremely conscious and considerate of the ethical and legal requirements of conducting formal data collection.

**Conclusions**

She summarizes her conclusions in the following statements: “The results of this study indicate sufficient evidence of a relationship between cultural identification and the identity statuses. The result is consistent with previous research studies with minority adolescents, which has found statistical relationships between ethnicity and the identity statuses.” She further adds, “While there was no statistically significant evidence of a relationship between religious participation and linguistic competency, respectively, with the identity statuses, it does not guarantee that such relationships are non-existent. Certainly, evidence from the three case studies provide if nothing else, anecdotal evidence that links between personal identity, linguistic competency, and religious participation do exist.”

**Comments**

Dr. Oshana’s achievement is very impressive because she succeeded in

tackling a theme that has a complex nature due to the very many variables involved. The multitude of variables in the domain of social sciences always poses much greater challenge than in natural sciences. Dr. Oshana has, nevertheless, succeeded in discovering the relationships among all the variables involved and knitting them together mainly because her approach to data collection and the investigative tools she used were quite effective and efficient. However, in assessing the extent of evidence of links between personal identity, linguistic competency, and religious participation, she rates it as anecdotal. I think the evidence of the above links, especially in as much as linguistic (language) competency<sup>2</sup> is concerned, could have been more accurately and specifically determined— regardless of whether the evidence was negative or positive— if the construct of language (linguistic) competency (competence) was better defined and described.

As a linguist, I am well aware of how controversial the term “linguistic competence” is. Chomsky first initiated the dichotomy ‘linguistic performance’ vs. ‘linguistic competence’<sup>3</sup> as a further elaboration and refinement of de Saussure’s dichotomy of ‘*parole*’ “speech” vs. ‘*langue*’ “language”<sup>4</sup>. According to Borden and Harris, Chomsky uses ‘linguistic competence’ as the “knowledge of a creative communication system and that knowledge is in the mind” to distinguish it from ‘linguistic performance’ as “the [actual] use of language”. To put it differently, ‘linguistic competence’ is the innate ability of an individual to produce and understand an unlimited number of utterances (i.e., it is theoretical) as opposed to linguistic performance which is the actual speech production (i.e., it is applied)<sup>5,6</sup>. Chomsky’s ‘linguistic competence’ was harshly criticized by cultural anthropologists led by Dell Hymes as being too theoretical to be functional in more real-life investigations that anthropologists usually conduct. It was, therefore, suggested that ‘linguistic competence’ be replaced by ‘communicative competence,’ which stands for actual use of language in different social and cultural settings. In light of the above linguistic elaboration, the use of ‘linguistic competence’ in the context of the dissertation seems to be too generic for a real context-embedded socio-psychological and cultural investigation, which has been the focus of the dissertation. As an applied linguist, I believe that even ‘linguistic competence’ would have been appropriate if it had

<sup>2</sup> The author seems to use ‘language competency’, ‘language competence’ and ‘linguistic competency’ interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Borden and Katherine Harris, *Speech Science Primer*, Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> André Martinet, *Elements of General Linguistics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> William O’Grady *et al*, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*, New York: St. martin’s, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

been appropriately defined to imply the level of proficiency in the basic skills of language (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing). In fact, in more applied domains of language teaching and learning, such as in ESL, bilingual and foreign language situations, and language maintenance and erosion the term ‘proficiency’ is the most commonly used than competency.

Once the concept of ‘proficiency’ or ‘competency’ is further refined and defined, the assessment of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) will yield far more objective and reliable results. To secure even better objectivity and reliability in the assessment of proficiency, the investigator needs to identify the different level of proficiency (beginning, intermediate, advanced, native-like and native). He/she has also to distinguish between the perceptive (decoding) skills (listening and reading) and productive (encoding) skills (speaking and writing), on the one hand, and between oral skills (listening and speaking) and literacy skills (reading and writing). Determining the level of proficiency and the distinctions among different language skills are highly practical and functional especially in assessing the differences in proficiency between the members of different generations of ethnic immigrants. Thus, when one notices that members of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation (parents) address their children (2<sup>nd</sup> generation) in Assyrian, for example, and they respond in English it simply means that they are more proficient in their receptive skill (listening) than their productive skill (speaking). In terms of native language erosion, the reluctance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation to respond in Assyrian is a clear indication that this generation is on its way to gradually cease communication in the native language.

The linguistic elaboration presented here is meant to highlight the need for more intimate interdisciplinary bridging between language, especially from a modern linguistic perspective, and other social constructs. However, regardless of my elaboration, Dr. Oshana has produced a magnificent treatise which is worthy of reading and publishing. At a young age, Dr. Oshana has truly demonstrated a huge academic and intellectual potential for more advanced research. Now that she has received the highest academic degree, she should know, like many other Ph.D. holders, that more advanced research only begins after receiving the ‘doctoral crown’. More advanced research certainly requires further penetration of the horizons of knowledge and more assertive vertical and horizontal invasion of its realms. Personal determination and passion are very effective driving forces. I congratulate Dr. Oshana on her achievement and wish her an even more brilliant intellectual future.