Free essay on does language have an effect

On Social Identity?

Introduction

When a person talks about language, it is generally referred to as a mode of communication between people. However, different cultures and countries have languages that are vastly different from each other. If these societies spoke only their own local languages, communication would have become very difficult as people, even from different states from within a country in some cases, simply would not understand each other. This is where having a common language becomes a convenient mode of understanding, conserving individual social identity while promoting stronger social bonds based on a common identity . However, speaking a common language does not take away from the unique social identity that a language gives its speaker. Here, it is argued that language has the power to unite or divide communities. Even though its influence is more subtle than, for example, that of religion or race, the influence of language as a social identifier is far greater.

1 Defining Identity

Social Identity has been defined as ' that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group' . In recent times, a view has been put forth that social or collective identity is created when self-identification is determined by a common self-aspect, that could be, among other things, a belief, a symbol or a psychological or physical trait . For example, a shared history or culture could be the basis of a social group to commonly identify itself with. In addition, psychologists

suggest that, this social identity could be damaged if a person's perception of being different from others, self-respect and self-worth are challenges by changes brought about in the social context . Here, it will be shown how these theories support the link between language and social identity.

2 Language and Cultural Identity

The link between language and cultural and/or sub-cultural identity has been highlighted by several scholars such as Cho and Baker . In addition, the mother-tongue is considered to be a vital part of the cultural or ethnic identity as it is inherent and irreversible since birth . Also, if a child has been brought up in a strong, culturally aware social setting, then the value and emotional effect of such early interaction can become an integral part of individual identity and remain with the person for life . However, in several cultures, greater emphasis is placed on other aspects of culture, such as religion and rituals, rather than language and, in such a case, language may have a lesser impact on identity .

In the year 1992, The New York Times carried a journal essay which stated that parents who were immigrants and had children who were studying English as their primary languages felt a mixture of pride at their child's development as well as sadness at the culture and ethnic identity being diluted by this adoption. They felt that, with their children taking on a new language, they would also be transforming their identity, abandoning ethnic traditions and orthodox family values in favour of a more acutely modern mindset. In cases where the parents do not speak fluent English, they feel dependent on their children to act as bridges to connect with the local

community. In families where parents try to strictly enforce traditional values and languages often experience growing generational gaps .

Recent theories have identified that an individual can have multiple identities in the cultural context. Cohen states ' One can be a Muslim in the Mosque, Asian in the street, Asian British at political hustling and British when travelling abroad, all in a single day' . It has also been noted that an individual can have a different identity within a home setting and take on a different role when outside this environment. For example, adolescence is a phase wherein a person seeks individualism and concepts of self-identity are formed. During this time, a person is more likely to seek alienation and even seek to be considered separate from his or her ethnic group . Hence, youngsters can often speak a different language or dialect at home and use a different one among peers or outside the home environment.

Epstein identified this trend as a sub-culture, putting forth the idea of a ' bricolage' or the delicate weave of ethnic elements, especially among the younger generations, which creates a sub-culture or unique identity . The importance of language in building this sub-culture is evident though the concept of ' language crossing', wherein an outsider can become a member of a sub-culture group by adopting the language being used by the group (Harris, 2006; Rampton, 1995). This concept is evident among Britons of South Asian origin who believe themselves to be part of this sub-group on the basis of language. Hence, language takes over the concept of ethnicity in the identity of such sub-cultural groups.

3 Language & Nations as Societies

The impact of language is said to expand to much bigger societies such as countries. In fact, diversity of languages present in a nation is considered to be an adherent to unity and brotherhood . In the past, there have been several examples on how minority languages in countries have been stereotyped or sometimes even prohibited in order to standardize the society . In such cases, the identity of minority groups suffers greatly as the uniqueness of language is eradicated. For example, while only 20% of the Welsh population in UK actually speaks the Welsh language, it is used by the community to differentiate themselves from their English counterparts. It forms a part of the total national identity which, if threatened with dominance by the English, can be defended on the bases of its uniqueness .

In the U. S. The various forms of English Language Amendments typically begin by stating: " The English language shall be the official language of the United States." The English-only versions call for prohibition of languages other than English by local, state, or federal government. This would mean that no publicly funded information or service would be available in any language except English, except for transitional bilingual education, foreign language instruction, or emergency information. The rationale for this, as expressed by the amendments' sponsors and supporters, is that English is the medium through which all Americans or potential Americans (i. e., immigrants) would share clarity of understanding that transcends any social circumstance, facilitates class mobility, and enhances democratic participation.

4 Languages and Mind-Sets

The language that a person, a community or a nation speaks often influences the attitude and perception of out-groups towards them. For example, in one takes a look at the Farsi or the Persian language, it can be noted that there are intricate influences of the Gallic languages or French. This may be considered strange as Iran was never ruled by France. However, it can be said that, Persians, especially those in charge of coding the modern language, held the French culture in high esteem and hence, believed that modifying their own dialect to make it similar to Gallicism, would improve the perception of Persia in the eyes of other nations. It would also contribute greatly to the country's self-worth.

Stigmatization of a language as being inferior to another can have a negative psychological impact on its speakers . Those who code languages and modify them based on other dialects, do so in hope of improving their society's position. However, common folk perceive these changes as a mark of the inferiority of their native language. Sometimes, communities may rebel against such perceptions by adhering further to their own language, in order to preserve their self-esteem and unique identity .

Linguists studying code-switching and other language contact phenomena have extensively demonstrated the complex regularities that govern bi- and multilingual behaviour. Yet there remains a sharp sense that bilingualism, especially among working-class immigrants, leads to disorder and pollution; see for example Walsh's 1991 study of teachers' attitudes toward bilingual Puerto Rican students in the Boston school system and the internalization of such attitudes by students. Such majority attitudes toward language difference are in many ways analogous to attitudes toward race difference .

When people talk about origin differences as the antithesis to or lack of whiteness, they perceive origin as racially marked, the sign of an underclass that threatens the nation. When people talk about foreign languages as the denial of English, they talk about them as threats to the integrity of the nation. When origin differences are seen as another way to embody the class-mobile idea of ' Americanisms', they are transformed into ethnicity and become acceptable. When foreign languages provide the means to secure a job or signal upwardly mobile ethnic solidarity, they are acceptable. Foreign language courses in high schools and college are justified as useful.

In the modern day scenario, viewing one's own language in a negative light often leads to social mobility or the adoption of a language which one considers to be superior. A study conducted by Williams in 1980 among Californians of Portuguese decent revealed that the community had stopped viewing their native language as being crucial to their ethnic identity, with about 8% having lost their fluency . Breakwell notes that this phenomenon is not uncommon as individuals are known to abandon that part of identity or self-aspect which is considered to be degrading in the person's current situation .

5 Language and Education

6 Conclusion

The importance of language as a crucial component of social identity across individuals and communities, cultures and sub-cultures, has been debated for long. Languages cannot be categorized being superior or inferior, these concepts, however, are assigned to languages by those who speak them as

well as those who perceive them. The reaction of native speakers to negative perception of their language ranges from social mobility to further adherence to the language as an ethnicity identifier. Language, as an identity component, is more flexible than other aspects such as race or religion, as it can be modified or even abandoned in favour of a new language by a person or even by an entire society.

It has been shown that social psychological theories can lead to better understanding on the relation between language and identity. Individuals who are part of a culture or sub-culture can utilize language to gain membership to other groups while countries use language to create their own distinct identity from other nations around them. At the same time, non-inclusion of foreign languages in educational curriculum has been found to be detrimental to a person's self-aspect and ethnicity. As English is taught as the primary language in most schools, often, a child's mother-tongue ends up becoming a ' second language'. Although several governments favour this gradual transition to a standardized language system, there have been far too many outcries concerning the dilution of ethnic and culture groups. In immigrant families, while adoption of a new language has been encouraged by parents so that their children are better able to blend into their new environment, there is also the awareness that this adaptation is going to impact their child's cultural identity and ethnicity. While children are more easily adjusted to a new language and do not find it difficult to let go of their heritage, their parents have more orthodox views and believe that, giving up their native tongue as their primary language would equate to abandoning their origins. While most people are aware of the impact that

language has on social identity, whether they adopt a new language or adhere to their native language depends greatly on personal preferences, societal requirements as well as outside perception. From the above arguments and proofs, it can be concluded that language has a definite impact on the social and psychological identity of people, forming a major part of their self-aspect.

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