

Language and identity

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



There is no doubt that language plays a very important role in human identity, and

linguistic factors and semantics denote how exactly an individual is able to communicate using his chosen language. As a matter of fact, today social scientists are intent on analyzing linguistic data, so that they may be able to study human behavior without the accompanying attitudes that are expressed in communication and in identity. Today the approach is interactional, and this must be compared to the systematic investigation and analysis of the speech of groups of individuals that began in the early nineteenth century, at which time the interest was on the organized language of the Enlightenment period.

Take for example the studies that Jan-Petter Blom and John J Gumperz carried out on the meaning of linguistic choice and the sociolinguistic approach to a problem in language. These studies used both ethnography and linguistics, and more particularly, the values that are expressed in an individual's speech genre, especially in relation to the self pride and identity that he reveals through his language when the occasion is an informal one. A second part of the study focused on the 'rules of alternation' that form a major part of the linguistic range used by a particular community.

Both Blom and Gumperz brought in the concepts of 'setting, situation and event', all of which are considered to be various stages one passes through while enacting personal strategies, and in this context, a differentiation is made between the concepts of 'situational switching' wherein alternations between different situations would signify a change in the situation, and '

metaphorical switching' explained by alternations that serve to enrich a particular situation, and make way to allow more than one single social relationship within the situation.

Bernstein (1961) has stated in his studies of the problems of language, society and identity that almost invariably, social relationships act as variables between linguistic structures and the manner in which they are realized when a person speaks. Upon testing the theory, it was found that the speaker's choice of semantically, grammatically and phonologically possible alternatives in his speech showed that the speech was patterned and predictable because they seemed to be based on certain invariable features of the local social system, thereby revealing the link between language and identity.

In Hemnesberget, Norway, most residents are native speakers of the language 'Ranamal', a dialect of Northern Norway that corresponded to cultural divisions within the state. In Hemnesberget, a native speaker displays great pride in his dialect, especially because his speech would be taken as being an integral part of his family background, and by speaking the dialect the speaker would symbolize pride in his community, as well as reveal the distinctness and the specialty of the language and what it has contributed to society in general.

The speaker would also try his best to show off his locality in the best possible manner when he speaks. This can be taken to mean that dialect as such can constitute a distinct linguistic identity for the individual who uses it. It must be stated here that the usage of the local dialect would reflect local

values. It would also signify those relationships between people that are based on a shared love and identification with the local culture. It also signifies and explains the fact that people who belong to the same community or group would automatically try to build up a sense of identification with each other through their use of language, and this would be achieved through greetings, exchanges of personal information, and even through their informal posture towards their fellows..

In this manner, the people belonging to this group would distinguish themselves from another, and in this particular example, the people of Hemnesberget stood apart from their neighboring settlement Mo I Rana in their use of the local dialect. A refusal to speak the local dialect for any reason whatsoever by the locals would be taken as a great insult and the individual would be ostracized for his action and condemned for his pursuit of a social distance from the fellow members of their community.

An experiment was conducted to test whether the assumption that one would share his local identity, by using the local dialect during conversations with his friends and neighbors belonging to the same community was correct. For this purpose, two gatherings were arranged by the locals and for the locals, and their conversations were recorded. It was found that the assumption was perfectly correct; not only did the participants perform 'switches' but they also showed a strong sense of self identity with the dialect that they used.

However, does this mean that only when one uses the dialect, one is considered a part of the local community? What if he had been brought up

elsewhere and was not aware of the intricacies of his own local dialect?

There are some of the questions that are raised during the reading of the piece.

In conclusion it can be stated that in interactional sociolinguistics, one cannot simply assume that language and society constitute two different realities, and the language that one uses is based on his self identity and self value. (Gumperz J John, Blom Jan-Petter)

Works Cited

Jumperz J John, Hymes, Dell, " The Ethnography of Communication"

Directions in Sociolinguistics, February 29, 2008