
The Relationship between Language and Ethnicity

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Abstract:

Language plays a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity. The ethnicity has a more striking relationship to language than other social factors such as gender, age, or social class. Thus language is only one factor in the ethno linguistic description of a people, or an ethnic group. Language is a primary characteristic and an always present characteristic of ethnicity. Without language you would have an incomplete description of ethnicity. Language is the primary component of ethnicity. What is ethnicity? Is there a 'white' way of speaking? Why do people sometimes borrow features of another ethnic group's language? Why do we sometimes hear an accent that isn't there? Drawing on research from a range of ethnic groups around the world, it shows how language contributes to the social and psychological processes involved in the formation of ethnic identity, exploring both the linguistic features of ethnic language varieties and also the ways in which language is used by different ethnic groups. Complete with discussion questions and a glossary, Language and Ethnicity will be welcomed by students and researchers in sociolinguistics, as well as anybody interested in ethnic issues, language and education, inter-ethnic communication, and the relationship between language and identity.

Keywords: Language and Ethnicity, inter-ethnic communication, language and identity.

Some characteristics of language include different linguistic levels (phonological, intonation and rhythm, lexical semantic, syntactical and sociolinguistics), language is a dynamic (changes constantly), has dialects (language variation), is sociolect (language depending on social class), and idiolect (individual language in which no two people speak exactly in the same way)". Language expresses many faces of a person's individuality or identity through speaking, belonging, providing the most natural badge, or symbol, and of public and private identity, the relationship between language and the many 'faces' is very important to our identity as it shows how we interact with others. Ethnic and social identity plays an important role on the way in which language exercises a dominant influence on our perception, whatever our mother tongue.

"The most distinctive feature of ethnicity in groups is not their mother tongue, but the foreign accent and dialect that characterize their use of the majority language". Over the movement of time, many of these features have become established, resulting in new varieties of language. Well known cases include the range of English language and dialects associated with the Indian sub-continent, from the West Indies, even from Puerto Rico. A non-regional example would be people with a Jewish descent, whose speech has had a large influence on many European languages.

Why would language play an important role in ethnic identity? Because language is such a widespread and evident feature of community life, to choose one language over another also

provides an immediate and universally recognized badge of identity, language also provides a particular clear link to the past, often the only detailed link, in the form of literature. But this link exists even after the ability in language has been lost; for example, many present day Italian-Americans know very little Italian, but they still see Italian as a symbol of their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a commitment to a group with which one has ancestral links. Once a group becomes conscious of its ethnic identity, it will wish to preserve and strengthen its position.

There is also a drive for language to act as a natural barrier between cultural groups, promoting conflict rather than cooperation. For example in bilingual communities, this factor is less important; but even here, language can focus the sense of political grievance in a clearer way than any other factor.

Between the 1960's and 1970's, Western Europe and North America experienced an ethnicity thriving. Considerable progress was made in integrating immigrant groups within their communities and there was a widespread rising of consciousness about ethnicity issues. This was especially noticeable in the United States (US), where a census showed that 17% of the American population claimed a mother tongue other than English, and the largest claims relating to Spanish, German, Italian, French, Polish, and Yiddish. However, during the 1970's a further change took place, where there was still an overall increase in the number of people claiming a mother tongue other than English. The Spanish still had to find their identity within the culture, because they were less accepted and were more aware of the importance of maintaining traditional linguistic ties in order to find their identity within the culture.

Language plays a crucial role in both the external perception of an ethnic group by outsiders and in the self-identification of an ethnic group. Language is explicitly mentioned in most academic works related to ethnic identity at the same time, it is emphasize that "although identity is deeply anchored in a society, this leading to a strong emotional attachment to identity markers, is not the only crucial aspect of group identity" (Schmidt, 2008:4). The major tendency is to regard ethnicity as composed of self-identification of a group, as well as its external perception by others. Ethnicity is considered the property of a group, associated with ancestry, culture, and of course language.

There are other views that emphasize the importance of ethnic boundaries and regard ethnicity as an aspect of relationship which often consists of ancestral, cultural traits that are commonly associated with particular ethnic groups, both by the members of groups themselves and by others. There are subjective and objective characteristics of ethnic groups. For example, Jenkins states, "the belief in common decent is of subjective nature, whereas language and cultural practices are objective means of facilitating a group's formation". He concludes that ethnic identification arises out of and within interaction between groups". Whereas Francois Grin considers ethnicity as "the result of subjective assignation or self-assignation". He defines ethnicity as a two-tier social construction in which one tier is non-elective (composed of ancestry, mother tongue, and cultural models internalized during childhood), and two-tiers result from assignation (by themselves and by others). His definition is consistent with Fisherman's for whom ethnicity is made up of three elements: paternity- the perception of intergenerational continuity, patrimony – linguistic and cultural substance of what is passed on and gives substance expression to this continuity, and phenomenology- the self-perceived character of ethnicity. No matter if those traits are subjective or objective, they are all means of facilitating a group's information.

Why would language play an important role in social identity? Because “social identity refers to the membership or association of an individual with a primary and other human groups, ranging from immediate family and expanding outward based on such factors as the individual’s capacities, experiences, mobility, and location”. A group’s native language spoken by an individual is likely the strongest social identity; it is usually corresponding with immediate family and extended family. The strength of ‘language group’ identity resides with the fact that language provides the primary means to categorize, think about, make sense of, and express our understanding of reality.

“When distinct groups that are each homogeneous are closely located and their differences are significant the psychosocial concept of the ‘other’ frequently becomes powerful. This means that the membership in one’s group is regarded superior to the ‘other’ and that the blame for a range of dissatisfactions or circumstances is assigned to the ‘other’ group”. Nationality, in the geographical sense of identity with or without a foundation can be a redoubtable social identity, especially in more developed countries with great mobility.

Probably the clearest way people have of their desire to be close to or different from those around them is through their choice of languages. Few societies are wholly monolingual, and it is this possibility for different languages to act as symbols of the social structure to which they belong. The use of different languages is often a sign of a distinct religious or political group. Switching from one language to another may also be an indicator of distance in everyday circumstances, as can be seen in different bilingual areas. Languages have developed a wide range of varieties for handling the different kinds and levels of relationships, which identify the social structure of a community, for example, occupation, subject matter, social status, and setting, but may also have been used as signs of social identity.

The role in which language plays in social and ethnic identity is the only way we have to acquire conceptual concepts (e.g. love, freedom, power, etc.) and to increase our knowledge, other than direct physical experience. Language offers belonging with those who share it, and the smaller the language group, the stronger the bond will be. Language is knowledge, and in today’s world knowledge is one of the key factors in being competitive. Knowledge is what creates the successfulness and growth we tend to take for granted. In an advanced industrial society and in an increasingly co-dependent world, the knowledge of other languages becomes essential. Just think of how the Internet has changed our lives, millions of people all over the world, that share common interests are able to converse with each other and exchange ideas. Not only are they able to do this because of all kinds of various technical advances, but also it’s because they share a universal language. “Language is obviously a vital tool, not only is it a means of communicating thoughts and ideas, but also it forges friendships, cultural ties, and economic relationships”.

Throughout history, as I’ve shown, many have reflected on the importance of language. There would have been no poets, philosophers, political leaders, writers, and other forms of art introduced in the world if language was not there.

Therefore it can rightly be said that language fulfills the basic human need of talking and enabled us to depend on others for its various needs in order to live. Language is a tool of communication in one’s hand.

Language has played a significant role in the service of mankind and it can be considered as a pioneer in the progress of human civilization.

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