

Reconstructing Linguistic Identities

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Abstract

The contemporary world is characterized by communication, information technology, globalization, and multiculturalism, which are concomitant to diverse socio-cultural conditions, multifarious life patterns and equally incoherent, unstable, constantly changing identities and amalgamation of cultures and languages. Language has a significant role within this new milieu, as it represents a powerful and flexible medium of assertion of identity against cultural homogenization and a means by which various identifications are articulated and positioned. This paper provides a theoretical explanation for the various crucial issues concerning linguistic identities. It seeks an investigation how language is being employed to construct identities, produce, and reproduce ideology in the interest of an identifiable social class or cultural groups through various discursive practices in order to maintain power structures. The study attempts to examine the hidden ideologies that try to make language the natural vehicle of identities, and how, ideologically, identities are being planned by the state at the pretext of language planning. The paper emphasizes the ample impacts of post-modernity, cyberspace, and internet on linguistic identities. It concludes with a note that it is not the hegemonic world monolingualism but pluralistic and diverse linguistic identities, which can prevail prolong.

Key Words: construction, cyberspace, identity, ideology, language, net speak

Introduction

In the recent times, the concept of identity has undergone significant shifts, which scholars attribute to the “crisis of identity.” Thus, scholars working in the different disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities have tried to explore the questions concerning identity from multidisciplinary perspectives. This paper is based on the premises that linguistic identities are important as they make sense to people, are meaningful and have due impact on the thinking and behaviour of the individuals and groups, overtly and covertly; and yet they accomplish, as they respond to the socio-political, economic, religious and cultural milieu of the speech community. Identities are indeed very important, meaningful and do influence the thinking and behaviour of individuals and groups, overtly and covertly. Identities are embedded in pragmatic narratives and are produced in every act of communication, consciously or unconsciously implicitly or explicitly. Within the network of identities, language as an interactional discourse, parameters like age, gender, ethnicity, and geographical background are communicatively produced and positioned.

The relationship between language and identity is an intriguing one, partly because debates on theories of language are as inconclusive and indeterminate as debates on theories of identity. However, some linguists may assume, as Noam Chomsky does, that questions of identity are not central to theories of language. Perhaps the most incoherent assumption we hold about language is that it is a neutral means of communication. The neutrality of language is sometimes conceived in terms of transparency (it means the same thing to everyone), sometimes in terms of arbitrariness (there is no essential link between words and their meanings), sometimes in terms of the empty vessel (which is “filled” with the speaker’s intended meaning), sometimes in terms of a natural force (language is organic, with its own mode of development).

These different conceptions of the neutrality of language lead to contradictory conclusions about how language works. Language conservatives can also use the arbitrariness of language to rationalize their usage: since the link between words and meanings is arbitrary, it does not matter what word you use to signify a person whose gender is unknown or unspecified. Arguments about language use are not between man and nature; they are between groups of people with differing opinions and interests. Identity formation is not as transparent or unproblematic as one may assume. Bourdieu argues that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships-many of which may be unequally structured. His position is that the linguists take for granted the conditions for the establishment of communication: that those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and that those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak.

Bourdieu (1977) further emphasizes that an expanded definition of competence should include the “right to speak” or “the power to impose reception.” We cannot ignore or isolate the people from the language who speak it during the process of interpretation, because communicative content lies not only what is said but also who is saying. Speakers themselves are a part of meaning represented within the representation. Why people resist giving up their language can be dealt in terms of identity of people who use that language.

Identity in the post-modern and globalized era has been found to be multiple, dynamic, and conflictual, based not on a permanent sense of self but rather the choices that individuals make in different circumstances over time. Linguists and deconstructionists, who developed the philosophical implications of the new linguistic theory of language, generally reject both the transparency and the empty vessel conceptions of the neutrality of language, but embrace the arbitrariness of language and its organic or natural mode of existence. Particular linguistic forms mean nothing in themselves and acquire their meanings only from their relations to other forms; language has its own inner dynamic, escaping the control of speakers’ intentions. Saussure’s remarks about the structural and arbitrary nature of signs arose from his claim that language was social, by which he meant only that it must be intersubjective, constructed in a negotiation between at least two people. Denying that individual speakers can have any direct control over the shape of a language lead to a view of language as autonomous and in a broader sense asocial, its reflections of the values of the society it came out of merely contingent and always subject to change. Nevertheless, breaking the link between language and its users (the death of the author) creates a paradoxical role for language: it is a natural force that is either irresistible, dictating meanings to speakers absolutely, or impotent, having no effect on the values and beliefs of its users.

Constructionists view identity as a social construction via language. Joseph (2004) while discussing the constructionist paradigm admits that “our identities whether group or individual are not natural facts about us but are notions we construct for different purposes.” However, essentialism considers linguistic identity as a given and fixed aspect of who an individual or group is. Categories such as nationality, class, race, gender, etc., are taken as givens, in terms of which people’s linguistic behavior can be analyzed. To know how individuals construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, manifest, perform, read, and interpret those identities as a part of their own identity repertoire.

In the last decade, the growth of the global computer network known as the Internet has facilitated the rapid emergence of online interactions of dispersed groups of people with shared interests. From last few years, the number of questions has been increased concerning the widely held anxieties about the effect of the information communication technology (particularly internet) on languages of multilingual nations. In the virtual world of cyberspace, no one can easily determine if you are Black or white, male or female, or rich or poor. However, one can immediately notice what language and dialect you are using. David Crystal remarks, the internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so that role of language becomes central. Indeed not withstanding with the remarkable technological achievements and the visual panache of screen presentation, what is immediately obvious when engaging in any of the internet’s functions is its linguistic character. If the internet is a revolution, therefore it is likely to be a linguistic revolution.

The paper will study and question the Sapirian notion of language, according to which ‘language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.’ The present article will explore and re-examine the cognitive, social, and constructed disposition of language in terms of the manifestation of identity. The hidden ideologies, which strive to make language natural vehicle of identities, have also been investigated. The paper also studies the nature of the inner content of language, which forces us to identify ourselves with that inner content and questions the functional aspects of language without communicating identities.

Method

The paper employs descriptive method. Descriptive method is used to establish the existence of phenomena by explicitly describing them (Seligar and Shohanmy, 1989:125). The paper definitely uses descriptive qualitative method—a method done by giving descriptive information in a detail and complete explanation of the issue in analysis (Surakhmat, 1994: 146).

Besides, the library research also completes the analysis throughout the paper by collecting, reading, and analyzing the data that are related to the research. According to Angel (2003:4) in *Sevens Steps of Library Research*, library research is the research on depth collection material on one or several subjects. A library research will generally include sources as well secondary sources. The writer conducts this research by using library research to

find the data and information from some books and other media that are related to this literary study because this research needs more reading as the observation.

This paper seeks an investigation how language is being employed to construct identities, produce, and reproduce ideology in the interest of an identifiable social class or cultural groups through various discursive practices in order to maintain power structures. The data source come from the study of examining the hidden ideologies that try to make language the natural vehicle of identities, and how, ideologically, identities are being planned by the state at the pretext of language planning. The data of the paper are the ample impacts of post-modernity, cyberspace, and internet on linguistic identities.

Discussion

3.1 Traditional Definitions of Language: Locating Identity

Linguists and philosophers have traditionally identified the primary purposes of language as one or both of the following:

Communication with other, it being impossible for human beings to live in isolation;

Representation of the world to ourselves in our own minds- learning to categorize things using the words of our language.

In Plato's *Cratylus*, Socrates says that the purpose of words is for discriminating things from one another, and for teaching each other about those things. Discriminating things from one another is what is meant by representation. Teaching each other about things is communication- where what is being communicated is, as it happens, representation. In fact, communication has largely been taken for granted by both linguists and philosophers. The important work to be done on language has been assumed the understanding of its functioning as a system of representation. There have been some notable expectations, including the figures in philosophy like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who lead attempts to analyze the functioning of language as a system of representation until finally deciding that, ultimately, representation cannot be separated from communication. Identity may be considered as third distinct major function of language, or a subcategory of representation.

Language is not culturally *neutral*. Voloshinov argued that it cannot be, not even at the level of individual linguistic sign. Individuals use language in such a way as to signal or create their cultural identity, making language culturally loaded. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too. As a matter of fact, even there is an ideological motivation for essentialism of identities- struggle over classifications, struggle over the monopoly of the power to make people believe, to get them to know and recognize. In other words, it can be said that individuals use language in such a way as to signal or more precisely, to create their cultural identity, making language culturally loaded. The classical understanding of language focuses on speakers as agentive subjects and the system of linguistic knowledge that allows them to produce and understand meaningful utterances. However, linguistic identity research, following upon the essential breakthrough of Malinowski's conception of phatic communication, takes what is 'meaningful' in linguistic utterances to extend far beyond their propositional content. It is interested in all those features of utterances, which hearers use to 'read' facts about the speaker- geographical and social origin, level of education, gender, and intelligence, likeability and so on.

It has been the business of sociolinguistics, as it has developed over the course of twentieth century and particularly in the second half of the century, to examine those features within a language by which we read a person's geographical and social origins, level of education, ethnicity, age, gender – the whole range of categorical identities into which we routinely group people. This information is not treated neutrally. The decisions we make about the people with whom we come in contact, is wholly based on their language. Any study of language needs to take consideration of identity if it is to be full and rich and meaningful, because identity is itself at the very heart of what language is about, how it operates, why and how it came into existence and evolved as it did, how it is learned and how it is used, everyday, by every user, every time it is used. The historical identification of 'a language' such as Chinese, English, and Hindi etc. It has always been closely connected with the establishment of a national, ethnic, or religious identity.

Nevertheless, language and identity are inseparable and it ought to improve our understanding of who we are, in our own eyes and in other people's, and it should deepen our comprehension of social interaction. Acknowledging that Atkinson and others argued that language is an important component in the structuring of an individual's perception of the world allows us to discuss how people view themselves within the world. We are engaged with language in a lifelong project of construction who we are, and who everyone is that we meet, or whose utterances we simply hear and read.

3.2 Linguistic Identities across Ideologies

Ideologies are systems of ideas that function to create views of reality that appear as the most rational view; a view that is based on “common sense” notions of how the social world ought to be. Language ideology has been defined by Heath (1977) as “the self evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of that group.” Identity formation is not as transparent or unproblematic as one may assume. “Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should consider identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, is always in the process of formation” (Hall, 1990). The formation of identity is an on-going process that depends on many discourses, such as language and what Hall refers to as the “old” identity. Erikson (1968) would agree with this constructive approach to identity, defining identity formation as a developmental process which takes place through the life cycle.

Within the boundaries constructed by social climate, everybody makes changes in his/her life. However, some of the changes in life are arbitrary and some are constrained by the social climate. With reference to identity, however, the privilege of choosing diminishes, especially when it comes to language. According to Josselson (1990), although the changes in some elements of identity formation can be self-monitored, the overall choice for identity itself is not arbitrary. She adds that identity is the interface between the individual and the world and its elements may be altered according to the environment around us.

The struggle over languages is not a debate over linguistic codes. Rather, the debate involves much more. Bakhtin (1981) illustrates that “we are talking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view.” Languages become representative of perspectives or points-of-view, in other words, of ideological positions. Debates over linguistic resources are ultimately debates over the valuing and devaluing of languages in the competition for status between groups of speakers. As Phillipson (1988) remarks, “In linguistic ideology, the dominant group/language presents an idealized image of itself, stigmatizing the dominated group/language, and rationalizing the relationship between the two, always to the advantage of the dominant group/language.”

3.3 Language Planning Versus Identity Planning

A few years ago, both terms in the above title would have been novel. Neither language nor identity was commonly thought of as an object of planning. The attempts of governments to manipulate these phenomena would have seemed too unsystematic, too natural, or too nefarious to merit the word ‘planning.’ Today, only one of these terms is unusual: identity planning. Language has become widely subjected to deliberate, systematic policy-making, and one eminent sociolinguist (Haugen 1966) has written that there is ‘a mushrooming of language planning in our times.’ Beyond this, the regulation of language practiced from time immemorial has become recognized as an important kind of activity. ‘Language planning’ is now named by some scholars and policy-makers as their field of specialization, and there is an increasing volume of publications explicitly in this field. If language planning has grown so common and so noticed, identity planning must be considered as well, because language and identity are interrelated. Many scholars believe that identity influences language, and many believe that language influences identity. If these beliefs are true, then the following conclusions make sense:

- ❖ Since language affects identity, an increase in language planning means that planners are having an increasing effect on identity. In other words, identity planning (whether deliberate or not) is increasing.
- ❖ Since good planning takes account of possibly adverse or dysfunctional effects, language planners should study the effects of planned linguistic change on identity.
- ❖ Since identity affects language, language planners should consider identity planning as a means of accomplishing their goals.
- ❖ Since language affects identity, those wanting to influence identity should consider language planning as a means.

Those wishing to foil the efforts of language planners should consider using identity, and those wishing to foil the efforts of identity planners should consider using language, to accomplish their aims.

All of these conclusions call for a knowledge of how language and identity, and particularly how changes in language and identity, interact. In addition, it is important to know what aspects or types of language and what aspects or types of identity are related. Finally, acknowledge of how susceptible language and identity each are to manipulation would be needed to determine how useful the planning of one is in affecting the other.

3.4 Identity Assertion in the Post-Modern Era

There are currently some 6,000 languages spoken around the world. It is estimated that some 90% may die out within the next century (Krauss, 1992), representing a loss of stunning magnitude to the cultural heritage of humanity. For many people around the world, defense of their language means defense of their community, their

autonomy, and their power. It is a way of asserting that “we exist” in a post-modern world where the most important question is no longer “What do you do?” but rather “Who are you?” Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. The role of language and dialect in identity construction is becoming even more central in the post-modern era, as other traditional markers of identity are being destabilized, including that of race. In this part, the study explores the relationship of language and identity in the age of microelectronics and information communication technology.

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. The process of becoming a member of a community has always been realized in large measure by acquiring knowledge of the functions, social distribution, and interpretation of language (Ochs and Shieffelin, 1984). In most of the world, the ability to speak two or more languages or dialects is a given, and language choice by minority groups becomes “a symbol of ethnic relations as well as a means of communication” (Heller, 1982). In the current era, language signifies historical and social boundaries that are less arbitrary than territory and more discriminating (but less exclusive) than race or ethnicity. Castells (1997) presumes,

“If nationalism is, most often, a reaction against a threatened autonomous identity, then, in a world submitted to culture homogenization by the ideology of modernization and the power of global media, language, the direct expression of culture, becomes the trench of cultural resistance, the last bastion of self-control, the refuge of identifiable meaning.” (p. 199)

The informational revolution which has begun in the last several decades, accompanied by the process of international economic and media integration known as globalization, has acted like a battering ram against traditional cornerstones of social authority and meaning. Language-as-identity also intersects well with the nature of subjectivity in today’s world. Identity in the post-modern era has been found to be multiple, dynamic, and conflictual, based not on a permanent sense of self but rather the choices that individuals make in different circumstances over time (Weedon, 1987). Language, though deeply rooted in personal and social history, allows a greater flexibility than race and ethnicity, with a person able to consciously or unconsciously express dual identities by the linguistic choices they make even in a single sentence (e.g., through code-switching). Through choices of language and dialect, people constantly make and remake who they are.

However, every action brings a reaction. The last quarter-century has also witnessed a worldwide surge of movements of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of people’s control over their culture and their lives. These differ from earlier social movements, which in many parts of the world were based on struggles of organized workers. As Touraine explains, “In a post-industrial society, in which cultural services have replaced material goods at the core of production, it is the defense of the subject, in its personality and its culture, against the logic of apparatuses and markets, that replaces the idea of class struggle” (Touraine, 1994).

3.5 Linguistic Identities in Cyberspace

The web is more a social creation than a technological one. ~ Thabo Mbeki

If language is becoming an increasingly important identity marker in the age of information, what then is the role of language in cyberspace? On the one hand, the Internet highlights the role of language while simultaneously masking the role of other identity markers such as race, gender, or class. As the saying goes, nobody on the Internet knows who you are, nor can they easily determine if you are Black or white, male or female, or rich or poor. However, they can immediately notice what language and dialect you are using. Moreover, too many people’s consternation, that language is usually English. As of 1996, some 82% of the Web pages in the world were in English (Cyberspeech), and most of the early nationally-oriented Internet newsgroups conducted their discussion in English as well (Graddol, 1997). This state of affairs caused great consternation for many people around the world, whose concerns were well expressed by Anatoly Voronov, the director of the Russian Internet service provider, Glasnet:

It is just incredible when I hear people talking about how open the Web is. It is the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism. The product comes from America so we either must adapt to English or stop using it. That is the right of any business. But if you are talking about a technology that is supposed to open the world to hundreds of millions of people you are joking. This just makes the world into new sorts of haves and have not’s. (cited in Crystal, p. 108.)

The early dominance of English on the Internet was due to several factors. First, a high percentage of early users were North Americans. Second, the Americans computer scientists who designed personal computers and the Internet did so on the basis of the “American Standard Code for Information Interchange” (ASCII) Code, which

made computing in other alphabets or character sets inconvenient or impossible. Finally, at a more basic level, by bringing together users in many countries, the Internet has furthered the need for people to communicate in an international lingua franca and strengthened the position of English in that role (The Coming Global Tongue).

As it turns out, though, the fears of an English-dominated Internet were premature. Recent analysis indicates that the number of non-English Web sites is growing rapidly and that a many of the more newly active Internet newsgroups extensively use the national language (Graddol, p. 61). Indeed, by one account the proportion of English in computer-based communication is expected to fall from its high of 80% to approximately 40% within the next decade (Graddol).

Underlying this change of direction is a more general shift from *globalization* to *re-localization*. The first wave of globalization—whether in economics or in media—witnessed vertical control from international centers, as witnessed for example by the rise of media giants such as Cable News Network and MTV. Nevertheless, in more recent waves, a process of re-localization is occurring, as corporations seek to maximize their market share by shaping their products for local conditions. Thus while CNN and MTV first broadcast around the world in English; they are now producing editions in Hindi, Spanish, and other languages in order to compete with other international and regional media outlets.

An important feature of the Internet furthers this process, which is its multi-channel capacity. While producing a bilingual television show or newspaper raises costs dramatically, producing a Web site in two or more languages is relatively simple and inexpensive. This allows the Web to both support English as an international lingua franca while simultaneously facilitating the use of other languages, including languages spoken by only numbers of people. People have a natural wish to use their own mother tongue, to see it survive and grow, and they do not take kindly when the language of another culture is imposed on them.

3.6 Linguistic Revolution and Netspeak Identity

The Internet does not introduce very new ethnic dynamics, but rather magnifies some that already exist. New immigration patterns and increased inter-racial marriage make racial identity more subjective and multiple; the anonymous, multi-channeled communication facilitated by the Internet deepens this trend toward multiple subjective identity (Turkle). Globalization heightens the role of English as an internationalization lingua franca while re-localization creates space for other national and local languages to reassert themselves; the broad mix of international, national, regional, and local discussion channels on the Internet first accelerated the spread of global English and now provides opportunities for those who challenge English-language hegemony.

According to Internet Society, there is remarkable growth in Internet use from a million users in 1990, to 544 million users in 2002 distributed across 201 territories. The number of non-English language users on the Internet is thus growing all the time. Informatization: information technology-led movement toward socioeconomic growth. This new linguistic revolution was achievable with the facilitation of Microelectronics technology, information technology, and cyberspace. It gave rise to a new variety of language called “*Netspeak*” which is an alternative to “*Netlish*,” “*weblish*,” “*internet language*,” “*cyberspeak*,” “*electronic discourse*,” “*electronic language*,” “*computer mediated communication*” or “*interactive written discourse*.” The regular citizens of internet are called as —“*netizens*” “*digital citizens*”, “*virtual community*”, and “*net generation*.”

Netspeak has transcended the limitations of physical environments, cultural differences, time zones, and space—to communicate anywhere else about anything at all. It has provided us a thought to rethink about the concept of time, space, and identity and has obliged us to consider virtual space. Netspeak is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both. Netspeak as something genuinely different in kind from speech and writing with electronically mediated properties.’ It is more than just a hybrid of speech and writing, or the result of contact between two long-standing mediums. Crystal asserts that Netspeak a genuine ‘third medium.’

David Crystal remarks, “The internet comes increasingly to be viewed from a social perspective, so that role of language becomes central. Indeed not withstanding with the remarkable technological achievements and the visual panache of screen presentation, what is immediately obvious when engaging in any of the internet’s functions is its linguistic character. If the internet is a revolution, therefore it is likely to be a linguistic revolution, which has implications for homogenization as well as multiplication of other national identities.

According to sociolinguists, the survival of languages depends not so much on numbers of speakers but rather on will and transmission. To put it simply, languages will survive if the speakers of the language have the desire to maintain the language and the means to transmit it to the next generation (Fishman, 2001). Transmission has traditionally occurred as tight-knit communities passing the language on to their children. In places where globalization and economic change has dispersed native speakers, such as in Hawai’i, communities are

experiencing with new media to assist transmission, such as electronic bulletin boards, which can bring together widely dispersed groups of speakers.

It appears thought that the most important role of the Internet is not to impact *transmission*—, which must continue to occur through oral interaction in families and schools—but rather *will*. As noted by Nancy Hornberger, “language revitalization is not about bringing a language back, it’s about bringing it forward.” People will struggle to maintain their language when they see it as not only an important part of their grandparents’ past, but also of their own future. Neither utopic universal multilingualism, nor hegemonic world monolingualism, but pluralistic and diverse linguistic identities, which can prevail prolong.

Conclusion

Identity is a product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon. Languages are not acquired in a vacuum, but rather as a function of attitudes, stereotypes, and ideologies, such factors play major roles in the acquisition, choice, and maintenance of languages. Identifying somebody with a particular group illustrates that we are looking him not only as the speaker of that group but imposing all other characteristics of the group like religion, belief, social status, world views, etc., which in turn questions the nature of relationship between language and identity. To know how individuals construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, manifest, perform, read, and interpret those identities as a part of their own identity repertoire. We move from one country to another, encounter different cultures, and learn different languages. Yet each movement in life brings with it a new shock of identity transformation, further confusion, and emptiness of living in between cultures and self-identities.

Number of languages in cyberspace are increasing which is good news for those worried by the global trend in language loss but it is also good news for those concerned that global intelligibility should not lose out to local identity. On the Net, all languages are as equal as their users wish to make them, and English emerges as an alternative rather than threat.

In terms of time, space, and context, identity is always in flux. Critically arguing, identity; either religious generated, state constructed, culture generated or language oriented has been used as a means of classification in construction of hierarchy and difference from others and hence one of the important dimensions of identification is stratification.

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