Language, Culture and Identity: An analysis of the symbiotic relationship between language and culture

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Abstract

This study investigates the unique relevance of culture in a language. The primary aim of this paper is to understand the underlying relationship between language and the cultural behaviour of those who speak it, and to explore the relation between anthropology, cognitive studies and linguistics. It also deals with the fundamental concept and complexities of anthropological linguistics and ethnography of communication. An important part of this study is to explore how the problems of migration and identity are dealt in the multilingual and multicultural society.

Keywords: *cultural behaviour, anthropology, cognitive studies, migration, identity*

"I am learning English only for learning a language. I don't need to learn its culture."

---Anonymous

Introduction

Thousands of years ago, when life came into existence, human beings started using language, and gradually formed family units. Then, perhaps, language evolved, and when people began to speak, they started building relationships, building civilizations, and in the process, culture was also created. Culture came into the fore because of the evolution of language. Language and culture are so inseparably mixed that it is not possible to separate one from the other. This is the task that researchers in sociology, anthropology and linguistics and other human oriented fields of study undertake to explore 'who we are' as individuals and as societies, and how language, culture and identity are inextricably mixed with one another.

The study of relationship between language and culture occurs in many fields, but in the field of ethnography of communication, it is of particular interest. Ethnographers focus on

patterns of communication behaviour and how those patterns depend on and influence sound patterns. Language is a rule governed system. Ethnographers explore how individuals use language, and how they come to share linguistic behaviours. Ethnographers have discovered the pattern of communicative behaviour, which occurs at the individual, group and societal levels of a society (www.enotes.com/research-starters/culture-language).

At the societal level, patterns relate to the functions of the language, categories of talk, attitudes and conceptions about language and speakers. At the group level, individuals who share membership in groups, defined by characteristics such as age, educational level, sex, occupation, geographic region etc may mark their membership by using languages similarly. At the individual level, personal characteristics may influence language use. For instance, an individual's language use may reflect various emotional states such as nervousness or fear (Saville-Troike : 2003).

Research Questions

In order to attain its main objective, the study aims to understand, and tries to find out some acceptable answers for the following research questions:

1. Are group and individual identities shaped and influenced by language and culture?
2. How do group and individual identities shape and influence language and cultural expressions? (www.hf.uio.no/iln/english/research/projects/ski/proposal-ski.pdf)

Speech Communities

In order to explore language use within a particular level of society or cultural unit, ethnographers first define parameters for the target group to be studied. A speech community is the most common unit of analysis, and consists of individuals who share both a language and the rules for integrating and using that language. Members of a speech community typically share values, attitudes and beliefs about the language itself and its role in the society.

Saville-Troike (2003) notes that a speech community cannot be defined only by its use of the same language. This is because language and language use are shaped by the context in which they exist. For instance, although English is a language used around the world, there are many varieties and dialects of English developed in many countries across the geographies. These varieties may contain different vocabulary items, different syntactical constructions and different usage of grammar. Just because speakers in England, the United States, South Africa and India speak English, does not mean that the speakers can be said to belong to the same speech community, and certainly they do not belong to the same culture.

Language, culture and identity are inextricably mixed, and can be observed and studied to understand the relationship between language and cognitive processes. To what extent does language use change one's thinking about one's identity, roles and relationship to others. This study also explores how interactions serve to shift or maintain identity. It is worth examining the fact that how individuals produce their identity in their talk, and investigate how the context of the situation affects identity formation during interactions.

Identity Formation

In exploring language and culture within a speech community, a key area of study is identity formation. Within any society, there are many categories with which individuals can identify. Individuals often see themselves as members of more than one category. For any category, there exists within a society, a set of rules or identifiers that mark individuals as members of the group. These rules develop over time through the interactions of the group members as interaction most frequently occurs through language.

Identity formation is not simply a conscious process but is influenced by unconscious psychological processes (De Vos, 1992). Identity is a dynamic, complex and ongoing process. Norton (1997) defines identity as, "how people understand their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future.

Language plays an important role in the establishment and maintenance of individual and group identity. For instance, language provides the means by which members can name their language. Language facilitates members of a group to talk about and evaluate themselves. Members may also display their membership by adopting particular language or language usage. Finally, through language, individuals are able to pass on the rules of group behaviour to each other and also from generation to generation. (Howard, 2000, Saville-Troike, 2003)

Since Sapir's (1921) sociolinguistic dictum that "language does not exist apart from culture," many researchers such as Stem, Brown, Rivers *et al*, advocate that language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded (Zaid 1999). Hence, it is a proven fact that culture plays a decisive role in language learning. Culture learning is a necessary and indispensable part of language learning

Role of language in shaping cultural dynamism

Speakers, especially the young people, are seen to be using language creatively in specific local contexts to achieve particular social goals. In the process, both language and culture develop and evolve with an aim to create locally meaningful identities. The language environment, especially of the youth, is decisively influenced by the contemporary technology based cultural forms. These new forms deeply influence the language, and are important means of English language learning. If these forms are used wisely and properly, they can become valuable resources for language learning. The technology based cultural forms like internet, television, short messages, whatsapp, instagram etc have been influencing the language environment of the young adolescents much more rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century. Today's electronic media is also generating a new lingo, a new language style, *i.e.* a new way of speaking and writing that includes shortcuts, simplifications, instant messages etc and whose primary users are, particularly the youth. It's a universally proven fact that youth, all over the world, have always been ready to adapt new technological innovations to make them feel aligned to the new changes reflected in the different cultural forms. (ethesis.nitrkl.ac.in/6726/1/S _Acharya_PhD_thesis pdf)

Identity in the multicultural and multilingual society

Multiculturalism and multilingualism are inevitable consequences of migration. Contact between different cultural and linguistic groups contribute to develop symbiotic expressions of identities, and to the formation of hybrid and complex identities. The question of identity is always present in the day to day practices of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Identities shape, and are shaped by languages and cultural expressions. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are, indeed, invaluable resources for the growth of culture and development of language. They are also resources for identity formation at the personal and group level, as well as resources for the movement and intermingling in society. The importance of the formation and perception of individual and group identity, is becoming increasingly significant, particularly in the contemporary 'political discourse'. (www.hf. uio.no/iln/english/research/projects/ski/proposal-ski.pdf)

Minorities, quite often, have a necessity to learn the majority language to get culturally assimilated in the wider society. The importance of assimilation is larger to an individual from a small minority to one from a large minority group. Individuals from minority group are more likely to adopt culture and language of the majority when the minority group accounts for a small portion of the total population.

A common identity is often regarded as essential for providing social cohesion in society. A challenge for a new understanding of identity, based on diversity, hybridism and change in identity has become much more prominent because of the rapid technological development, and the movement of people from one place to another. The notion of identity is central for understanding matters concerning integration and socialization of migrants. The knowledge of identity in a plural society is truly necessary for political and educational decision making.

Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology deals with the study of language and society. Linguistic anthropology enables researchers to conceptualize language in terms of culture it represents and, in return, it supports linguistic and cultural behaviour. Using methods like ethnography, linguistic anthropologists, it is easy to comprehend the central role that language plays in our understanding of the world around us.

Language and culture are inextricably mixed. Language is more than simple semantics. Language is embedded with meaning, and provides channel for both inter psychological and intra psychological communications. A full appreciation and comprehensive understanding of language can only be achieved by viewing language through a cultural lens.

The role of language as a powerful tool is used to both create and perpetuate the cultures of societies. Linguistic anthropology is a valuable tool that can be used to examine the inseparable concept of language and culture. Regarding the inexplicable link between language and culture, it is arguable that the study of both concepts is equally important.

Exploring the intricacies of language and culture has a wider implication when the concepts are studied together, and in relationship with each other

Duranti describes linguistic anthropology as "the study of language as a cultural resource, and speaking as a cultural practice." From a linguistic anthropological perspective, human beings or users of language are viewed as social actors, using language to create, maintain and perpetuate culture and social structure. Duranti uses the phrase 'speech community' to describe communities in which prolonged patterns of culture, language and interactions have developed. Duranti explains the concept of speech community as an entity that language represents, embodies, constructs and constitutes for meaningful participation in a society and culture. Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between language and culture is underscored through the examination of societal participation.

Speaking a language, using the words and expressions of a society, represents participation in and belonging to a speech community. Linguistic anthropology focuses on three interconnected theoretical constructions, which serve to further elucidate the intimate relationship between language and culture:

- Performance
- Indexicality
- Participation

Words and language function not only as symbolic representations but also stimulate action. Duranti discusses "this ability of words to do things--- their per formative power, which is, in turn, possible, thanks to their ability to point to something beyond themselves--- through their indexical properties." It is arguable that without a cultural framework, these per formative powers, indexical properties, and participative dimensions would cease to exist. Since culture is the cornerstone upon which language is built and maintained, and language, in turn, enables culture to survive.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a commonly used methodology that enables researchers to study language, social life and culture. In ethnographic studies, researchers typically spend extended periods of time immersed in a society of peoples. This study provides valuable insight into the day – to-day activities of a society as well as the wider social and cultural structures in which interactions occur. Ethnographers, therefore, offer inside views of a society which is reflected in its linguistic and cultural behaviour.

Ethnographic studies can provide invaluable insight into the culture, language and other aspects of a society. The primary role of an ethnographer is that of an observer; observing over extended periods of time theoretically enables the researcher to discern language, culture and social pattern. However, methodological patterns can arise only when a foreigner suddenly implants him or herself into a society. (https://www.papermasters.com/ language-culture.html). For instance, Duranti discusses the experience of Elinor Ochs in her study of

Culture and Language Development Language Acquisition and language Socialization of Western Samoanvillage.

Instead of observing children, and caregivers performing their day-to day activities including language acquisition and use as well as socialization, Ochs found her subjects of study speaking and acting on their best behaviour thus initially preventing her from developing an authentic understanding of their actual language acquisition and socialization pattern.

Conclusion

Culture and language are integrally related. Language represents one system of culture, and culture is transmitted via language. Investigations into the relationship between these two concepts involve exploring how individuals and societies are constructed, maintained and transmit identities. True communication is the result of deciphering those linguistic symbols in view of the social context in which they were produced (Smith and Luce: 1979).

Language has been defined as the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression. The purpose of language is to communicate with others, to think and to create foundation for shaping one's standpoint and outlook to life. Therefore, the relationship between language and culture is definitely symbiotic as one cannot function without the other (www.customwritings.com).

Individuals and societies construct, maintain and transmit identities. Frequently, this investigation involves examining the texts that are created within a society in order to establish the underlying assumptions and ideologies by which individuals are operating. Multilingual individuals negotiate their identity by making language choices and how socialization processes impact the maintenance or evolution of language within a culture. Culture plays a major role in the acquisition of language and its development. Humans are born without a language but are born with language-acquisition faculties which enable them to learn languages. Research has proved that humans learn their local language through cultural transmission rather than from mere formal learning.

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