



Role of Language in Maintaining Social Identity

Subhadarshini Mohapatra¹, and Dr. Suvashree Suvadashinee²

- 1) Research Scholar, Basic Sciences and Humanities, Silicon University, Odisha, India
2) Sr. Assistant Professor, Basic Sciences and Humanities Silicon University, Odisha, India
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Abstract: *Language acts as the primary architect of restoring social identity, instead of only being a tool for information exchange. It acts as a symbol of culture, standard and status through varied accents, dialects, vocabulary and many communication styles. Besides, it binds communities, alerts regional allegiance, differentiates natives from foreigners and proceeds with social contexts to reflect, reinforce and construct who we are. This paper will try to explore how linguistic practices, with various speech styles, registers, lects (dialects, sociolects, ethnolects, idiolects), trans languaging and linguistic variations act as essential signs of cultural exchange of heritage. This study also aims to find the pertinent role of “embodied cultural capital” which displays how dominant languages or standardized dialects affirm social prestige along with power while non-standard varieties often become signs of resistance or marginalized identity. In the contemporary globalized era, preserving one’s social self by balancing professional languages with vernacular and native languages has become a formidable task due to rapid technological advancements and large-scale migration. The preservation of linguistic diversity will inevitably lead to the conservancy of human social diversity along with individual identity. It shapes both individual as well as collective experiences of the Globe. Being the fundamental arch of the social system, it exhibits the social, cultural and traditional artefact. It is the forerunner of both peace and stability. Language not only plays a crucial role in the dissemination of information, but also acts as a vital force in reclaiming and restoring social and collective identity.*

Key words: *social identity, language maintenance, cultural exchanges, linguistic balance*

Introduction

Language is not merely a system of words and rules. It is a living expression of who we are, how we see the world and how we choose to belong within it. The relationship between language and identity is organic and inseparable. Language is the primary vehicle through which individuals negotiate their stand within a definite social ladder. In the 21st century, the hegemony of the English language has created a complex “Linguistic Landscape”. Language is quite important in restoring social as well as cultural identity. It serves as a carrier of age-old traditions, values, ethics and social practices. Not only language preserves social customs and cultural heritage but also establishes social stability and helps individuals to connect with

their roots and represent their unique culture. It unites communities by fostering shared cultural experiences. However, wide spread of global languages poses threat to indigenous languages in multilingual societies at present leading to deterioration and even loss of minority languages amidst cultural diversities. We find linguistic expansion due to varied digital platforms but also see potential risks to authentic cultural preservation. It is important to promote multilingualism and save languages in danger to restore cultural identities in a rapid globalized interrelated world. As language is both a bridge and a mirror between individuals and their collective identity, it shapes everyday lives, rituals and practices of people. Altogether, it plays a multi-layered role in maintaining social identity and its effects on social conglomeration, preservation of heritage and tradition along with trans- cultural interference.

Literature Review

We know language serves as a fundamental, dynamic marker of social identity. It functions as an important instrument for creating, balancing and representing group membership, pride and age-old traditions. Research reveals that language acts as a boundary- marking mechanism distinguishing between social groups while maintaining internal cohesion. It is a vessel for all collective memory, tradition and through code- switching, a reflection of adaptation to changing social contexts. If we go deep into the basic functions of literature, we then come to know the following themes of literature. They are as follows-

Determinant of social identity and belongingness

A community's solidarity and social identity are restored through literature. It displays social identity as a self-concept through shared language. Language offers individuals with a sense of rootedness and continuity. Along with this, it acts as a carrier of culture and heritage. Instead of being a tool for communication, language acts as a container for culture, transmission of values, traditions and narratives across generations. It acts as a primary link between historical identity and contemporary self- perception.

Adaption and Migration

Today in a novel cultural atmosphere, language plays a crucial role on the part of individuals for navigating through social changes with language switching and code switching. In such cultural junctures, language serves as a mechanism to balance multiple identities.

Negotiation of identities in today's globalized world

The risk of digital platforms along with globalization has enhanced. The complexity of language- based identity which offers spaces for cultural expressions poses threat to the existence of minority languages and dialects.

Theoretical Frameworks and Foundation

Social Identity Theory (SIT)- Developed by Henri Tajfel (1978), it is the foundational framework for understanding how individuals derive their self- concept from group memberships. This theory posits that language represents a society being a salient marker of group identity and individuals get their recognition from communities with specific dialects, accents or linguistic styles. This differentiates them from other groups. It helps in heightening "Positive Distinctiveness" and self -respect. Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Ethno linguistic Vitality theory of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) suggest that individuals maintain self- image favouring their "native tongue" over a "foreign tongue". It is revealed that self- respect comes from group memberships (e.g. ethnicity, team and nationality)

Communication Accommodation Theory-(CAT)- This theory is developed by Howard Giles who explains how individuals adjust their communication- such as accents, speech rates and gestures to manage social distance during interactions. It focuses on how individuals adjust their speech either moving closer to their listener's style (convergence) to gain social approval or emphasizing differences (divergence) to assert a definite group identity.

Social Constructivism- Vygotsky's social constructivism is a learning theory which states that knowledge is not just gained but actively built through social interaction, language and culture emphasizing collaboration where learners create meaning with peers. In other words, identity is not a fixed trait but a process continuously negotiated through social interaction and discourse. This linguistic perspective is rooted in Vygotsky's work, which reveals that the relationship between language and identity is bi-directional and interactive. It further augments that language does not just reflect a pre-existing identity but actively creates and negotiates it through social interactions and developments.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory- This theory is formulated by Giles and Johnson (1981,1987). The theory explores how ethnic groups use language as a core sign of maintaining their identity especially when in contact with dominant linguistic community et al. Giles. (1977) expanded this into "Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) Divergence- To maintain a distinct social identity, speakers may intentionally accentuate their dialect or accent to distance themselves from an out-group." Convergence- Speakers may adopt the features of a dominant group to gain social capital often at the risk of losing their original group identity.

Indexicality and "Stance- Taking"-Research by Silverstein (2003) and Ochs (1992) introduced the concept of indexicality. Language features (like a specific slang word or rhythmic cadence) "index" or point to specific social meanings.

First- Order Indexicality- A specific accent marks a speaker as being from a certain region.

Second- Order Indexicality'-It is found that some accent is associated with social values like "toughness", "Intelligence". By using these indexical markers, individuals signed their alignment with specific social personas.

Post Structuralist Perspective- More recent research (e, g, Norton, 2013) explains that identity is not stagnant or static. It is rather fluid, dynamic and fragmented. But on the other hand, use of language is constant, and an unceasing process of negotiating one's position within a social world.

Principles of Linguistic Maintenance

Through Linguistic Markers One's identity is represented through accents, dialects, idiolects or socio lects. Besides, regional speech patterns act as "Symbols" of identity. They accurately reflect a person's cultural background, social class, educational background and also personal experiences. One's language use or dialect can help others recognise their shared identity or difference. They also carry emotional and historical significance linking heritage and traditions. It inevitably, creates a cultural and social identity uniquely individualistic.

Code switching

In order to move through different social contexts, bilingual or multilingual individuals often switch between languages or dialects. This is a strategic tool for maintaining and managing multiple facets of identity such as projecting a professional person in one setting while connecting to cultural roots in another.

Linguistic Clustering

From the study, it is found that individuals often form “meta clusters” based on shared indigenous languages to find emotional and professional support reinforcing their native identity in diverse environments like multinational corporations. Such ‘clusters’ helps to channel larger language variations by grouping smaller speech patters into broader identity categories.

Narrative Construction

“Self-Narrative” is maintained through language in the form of oral, traditional proverbs and folklores. Moreover, societies and communities preserve their historical narratives and transmit cultural values across generations. Such oral traditions, allow the construction of a deep-set belief system and aids in community building.

The Theoretical Foundation: Identity as Performance

Early sociolinguists such as Labov (1966) established that language variation is not random but structured by social class and context. Modern research has shifted towards the “Socio Constructionist” view. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argues that “identity is not a fixed internal trait but a dynamic emergence” through interaction. Identity is not something we “have, it is something we “do” through linguistic choices.

Language in minority and migrant communities.

As we know, in order to maintain a “traditional language” in today’s globalized world, preservation of ethnic identity is often required. Fishman (1991) highlighted that when a community loses its native tongue, the unique social structures and cultural identities associated with is often collapse. It results in ‘cultural erosion’, where the younger generations may feel detached from their heritage resulting in gradual loss and extinction of such inherent traditions and norms.

Code- Switching

Modern scholars like Myers-Scotton (1993) view code- switching not as a lack of proficiency, but as a sophisticated tool for navigating multiple identities e.g. being both ‘Mexican’ and “American’.

Digital Identity and New Social spaces

Current research has turned towards digital realms. Crystal (2006) and others have explored how ‘Net Speak’ and emojis serve as modern-day dialects. In online subcultures, the use of specific jargon acts as a ‘Shibboleth’ a linguistic password that maintains the boundaries of the digital social identity and excludes those who do not belong. Gradually, such changes though appear progressive, absorb into a dominant culture with less diversity in social landscape.

Research Questions

1. How is individual’s social identity influenced by English proficiency?
2. To what extent is English used to perform “Prestige” rules in social interactions?

Methods adopted

In order to explore the role of language in maintaining social identity, the researcher has adopted a qualitative research approach which involves both primary and secondary data collection methods. The study meticulously reviewed the prevalent literature on language and social identity. It also analysed case studies from various social set ups and conducted interviews with individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. It explores how language

intervenes traditional social practices, rites and rituals and even everyday communication. It also hints the impacts of social media on maintaining social identities through digital use. Apart from these, the study has adopted three social and psychological methods to conduct this research.

A. In order to conduct the qualitative research, the following steps were taken -

1. Close Interviews-It explores personal experiences of language use. It also deals with the attitudes and feelings of belonging of people while using a particular language or dialect.
2. Observation of Participants- Observation of participants brings clarity to know how language is used in real- time social interactions and rituals.
3. Case Study- It enabled the researcher to analyse specific communities, schools, colleges, educational institutes or organisations to understand context- dependent identity formation.
4. Focus groups- It helps to know about identity formation discussing shared linguistic norms, concepts and perceptions of indigenous communities or foreigners.

B. Linguistic and Socio- Linguistic Analysis

1. Discourse Analysis- It examines spoken or written texts to find patterns of key areas of focus in the given Methods.
2. Education and Language policies- It delves deep into the school, college or academic environment to explore how these environments affect in the preservation of students' identity.
3. Digital Ethnography- It enables us to know how virtual identities are formed through the analysis of language use in social media.

C. Quantitative Methods

1. Socio -linguistic Surveys- In order to adopt this method, questionnaires were used to collect data on language choice and attitudes towards different dialects from a representative sample.
2. Variationist Sample- It measures the frequency of specific linguistic variables (e.g. how often someone drops "r" at the end of the word) and correlating them with social factors like class, gender or age.
3. Social Network Analysis- Through individual's social ties to know how the "closeness" of one's network influences him or her to maintain a specific group dialect.
4. Linguistic Landscaping- Through analysing public signs and advertisements in urban areas, it helps to know how different languages are given space and prestige.

It is found in today's globalized world that people often share a stronger social identity with the help of "internet slang" than they do with their physical neighbours. Debate and investigation reveal that language is the "software" of social identity. It is the weapon through which we are united as well as segregated. Language may be standardized institutionally, but human tendency forces that language will always remain a fluid, evolving and deeply personal area for the restoration of social and community life. The role of English in social media creates a "Digital Social Identity" that is increasingly becoming the primary identity for "Social Elevation and Upliftment." This is not merely about communication; it is about the "performance aspect of

identity.” By speaking and performing properly in English, the individual signals their membership in the “Global Middle Class”.

Research Gaps

While the link between language and identity is well documented, current literature is increasingly looking at-

1. How language maintains multiple identities simultaneously?
2. How gender, race and profession influence identity of an individual?
3. How the spread of English as a lingua franca threatens or reshapes local social identities?

Discussion and Analysis

It is prominent from the study that language plays an indispensable role in restoring cultural values and traditions. Indigenous languages are not merely tools of communication. Rather they serve as harbingers of culture, heritage, myth, folklores and customs which have been passed through generations. Participants also hinted that language not only helps preserve traditions but also offers a means to protect cultural homogenization in a globalized world. The study highlights that language helps in the restoration of social cohesion within communities through shared communication and collective memory. It promotes inclusivity as individuals express their thoughts, ideas and emotions in consonance with their cultural background. Consequently, this shared mode of communication fosters the sense of belonging and solidarity among communities. On the other hand, sometimes language becomes the bone of contention between cultural conflict and identity struggles. Colonization as well as globalization paved the way for language loss. So, time has come to revive endangered languages and connect them into educational systems and daily chores.

Primary Findings:

The findings suggest that English acts as a bridge to social issues. Besides, the findings of this study, challenge the “Linguistic Imperialism” paradigm (Phillipson,1992), which views English as a predatory force. The data suggest a nuanced negotiation of identity where English is a strategic asset. Two primary domains: the Quantitative analysis of survey instruments regarding linguistic attitudes and the Qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews widen the research. The data suggests a functional split. English is maintained for “Instrumental Identity” while the native tongue is reserved for “Integrative Identity” (family, religions and traditions etc). With the expansion of the digital world the “Instrumental” is becoming increasingly “Personal” blurring the lines.

A significant finding in this study is the declining competence of the “native speaker mode”. Participants in the study did not express a desire to sound British or American. They expressed a desire for “Intelligibility and Prestige” within their own local context. The shift of owning a language represents a “de-colonization” of the mind. Maintaining social identity through English now involves a sense of ownership. English is no longer viewed as a “foreign” language but as a “local” tool for social participation. Added to it, it is found that the acquisition of English does not necessitate the loss or death of local identity, they coexist as a state of “Linguistic Flux”. In some cases, English provides a “neutral” ground that bypasses local, ethnic or tribal tensions allowing for a broader national social identity.

Secondary Findings:

Influence of power and prestige of language

We know power boost's linguistic identity. "Prestige Dialect" often restores social hierarchies. Through Standardization, marginalized groups fall as victims to "Social Mobility" and "Identity Loyalty". As a result, this gives rise to "Identity Conflict". This forces immigrants to give up their native tongue and simultaneously accept a national tongue in order to get a job in that country. Identity erosion is thus common. On the other hand, when a group successfully opposes for the official use of their language, they reclaim their social status with political power. According to Bourdieu's theory of "Cultural Capital" English serves as a form of "Linguistic Capital".

In multi lingual societies, the ability to switch into English allows individuals to claim membership in an elite, educated social class. English functions as a form of "Symbolic Capital". Instead of choosing between "National Identity" and "Global Identity", participants created a "Hybrid Identity". For instance, the use of "Sing lish" in Singapore or "Hinglish" in India serves as an in-group marker that excludes "outsiders" "who only speak standard English or only a local dialect. In such situations, English acts as a custodian. Proficiency allows individuals to cross boundaries into elite social circles. Conversely, the type of English used (accent, vocabulary or grammar) acts as a subtle marker of specific sub- identities, such as Western- educated vs Locally- educated. It is found that previous researches often view English as a 'killer language' that replaces local dialects. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding how individuals use English for complement rather than replace their social identity.

Conclusion

To conclude, we come to the statement that the role of language in maintaining social identity is both foundational as well as transformative. The analysis reveals that language or linguistic maintenance is not merely a system of grammatical rules. Rather it is influenced by social norms which are constantly revolving and evolving. Moreover, it is a dynamic social practice between individual perception and community affiliation. Based on Social Identity Theory's concept of "positive distinctiveness", it helps individuals to unite them with their heritage, socio-economic status and culture. The maintenance of linguistic identity is found through distinct levels. On a macro level, language acts as a repository for collective meaning and cultural continuity. On the micro level, individuals through code- switching and divergence move through complex social hierarchies and resist linguistic assimilation before dominant pressures.

However, the relation between language and identity is fluid and dynamic in nature. In an era of globalization and digital connectivity, the age- old ties between geography and dialects are changing. Though "Linguistic Imperialism" threatens the survival of minority tongues, the rise of digital socio lects and evolution of traditional languages display a constant drive to maintain distinct social selves. When a language is perfect, its speakers protect social diversity which is synonymous with linguistic diversity. For a pluralistic society, varied linguistic forms should be maintained. As a result, psychological and social weight of language is important in fostering inclusive environments with divergent and multiple identities. The role of English in maintaining social identity is transformative rather than destructive. It allows individuals to navigate the globalized world without disturbing their local heritage and traditions. For policy makers, this suggests that English medium education should be integrated with curriculum rather than replace local language institutions to support holistic identity development.

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