THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF A SOCIALLY DYNAMIC SOCIETY

Rachel Kamau

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF A SOCIALLY DYNAMIC SOCIETY

Rachel Kamau

Post Graduate, University of Nairobi

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study aimed at assessing the role of language in the national identity of a socially dynamic society.

Methodology: A desktop literature review was used for this purpose. Relevant seminal references and journal articles for the study were identified using Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria entailed papers that were not over 20 years old.

Findings: From the researcher's perspective, there is a danger that, if political communities are viewed as deriving from a shared or common cultural heritage or tradition, the political actions they take are interpreted as motivated by a shared sense of „ethnic identity‟. Languages symbolize identities and are used to signal identities by those who speak them. People are also categorized by other people according to the language they speak. People belong to many social groups and have many social identities. There is often a particularly strong link between language and a sense of belonging to a national group, a sense of national identity. 'National' language(s) are taught in schools as subjects and are also used in schools to teach other subjects. For some children this means learning to read and write, and then speak, a different language from the language of the home

Key words: *language, national identity, dynamic society*

INTRODUCTION

Accordingly, our definition of 'nation' follows that of Elaine et.al (2007) which draws in the sociocultural authenticity as a defining factor. According to Emerson a nation is "a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future".

What is more, our definition of national identity, goes in line with Bilewicz et.al (2020) specification which says that "national identity is a multidimensional concept…extended to include a specific language, sentiments and symbolism." As other scholars generally define it, national identity is a characteristic feature of a nation that differentiates it from other nations (Bhugra et.al, 2005). Therefore, unlike the past political 'philosophers' of the country who chose

to consider Ethiopia as just one nation with many ethnic groups and one national language, this study considers the country a as multi-national unit with multilingual nationalities. This means each linguistic groups of the country is treated as a separate nation in this monograph.

As already stated above, language is one of the salient features of national identity. Regarding the historical origin of this phenomenon, Suzuki (2007) tells us that in the medieval period university students of international European cities who belonged to the same linguistic groups used to identify themselves as the same nationals and in the same period the expansion of French territories seemed to depend on linguistic bases too. But this trend has been changed very quickly because of the European cultural renaissance (Laurentsyeva et.al, 2017). Yet, the use of language as a symbol of national identity once again popped up in the 19th century and pulled through to the 20th and the 21st century though not uniformly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Godwin-Jones (2018), language is essential in the construction of identity both as a medium through which it is constructed and as a symbol. It is through conversational structures such as language preference that social structure including group membership of ethnic identities are created, ascribed, and accepted. In a separate article, Bhugra et.al (2005) discusses that speakers frequently evoke membership to "collections" or categories through conversations. By displaying their membership or categories, they are also revealing their recognition of other participants' identities. Speakers fit themselves and others in a language based categorization device which define them as speakers of specific languages.

Hong et.al (2001) also says that language preference is a way speakers ascribe and accept or reject group membership or identification. In language preference and choice, bilinguals seem to distinguish between the "we" and the "they" depending on in-group or out-group interactions, which represents how bilinguals identify themselves in regards to the majority and minority cultures. Elaine et.al (2007) adds that the status of a language as majority or minority in a particular society in identity negotiation in a multilingual community is very important. In her research in a bilingual program of Spanish-English bilingual elementary students, she concludes that the quantity of their English or Spanish use and the functions they fulfill with each language are linked to their identification as social beings. While language choice was not the single factor influencing students' identities, each language took on different meanings and functions, allowing variable construction of identities.

Along-side language preference and use, Bilewicz, et.al (2020) suggests that social interactions also contribute to the creation and negotiation of identities. Speakers may use a language that is not considered their "own language", providing opportunities to explore and redefine their

identities. Furthermore, the social relations brought along in the conversation can influence speakers to choose a certain language in interactions. Bilinguals not only use their two languages to establish themselves in opposition to an outer society but also to establish themselves within a group, creating in-group versus out-group interactions.

The power associated with language is another important issue to consider relative to identity. Kouhpaeenejad et.al (2014) posits that "linguistic practices are symbolic capital that is distributed unequally in the linguistic community." Some languages have economic and social rewards compared to other languages which can ascribe more power to individuals who choose to speak that language.

Given all this research on language preference, use, and identity formation, it is important to note a contrary position. Opposite to the previously discussed authors, he asserts that bilingual and monolingual is not a membership or identification category (Suzuki, 2007). In other words, bilinguals do not group and identify themselves similarly simply because they speak more than one language.

The idea of language as a method of displaying one's identity can be seen in works by a range of linguists. One of the most fundamental ways we have of establishing our identity, and of shaping other people's views of who we are, is through our use of language (Laurentsyeva et.al, 2017). This function is indisputable and unavoidable. Whether one likes it or not, every time one uses language to communicate, membership of one or more identity groups is shown, be that as part of a group of speakers of a certain language or a certain linguistic variety, a certain social class, age group, educational background and indeed many more. One cannot communicate using language without disclosing at least some of this information about one's identity. This second use of language - that of being a means of outward portrayal of identity is the one which will form the basis of our study, a sociolinguistic study specifically looking at the use of language to express identity.

The use of language to construct identity has been explored by many scholars among multilingual societies. And all of them show that neither identity nor language use is a fixed notion as both are dynamic, depending upon time and place (Elaine et.al, 2007). How we perceive ourselves changes with our community of practice, allowing us multiple identities over the years or even within a day. In discussions of national identity, many have pointed out that language is not a necessary requirement to identify with a nation (e.g., a person may identify themselves as Irish yet not speak Gaelic). Additionally, a nation or an individual ascribing to that group may have a symbolic attachment to an associated language, but may use another more utilitarian language instead (Hearn et.al, 2018). This presumes the speaker is able to self-select their nationality, or more broadly, their identity.

When a single language is prized above all others, there is danger that those others will be silenced, both literally and figuratively. Kramsch (2014) states that "a standard language ideology, which proposes that an idealized nation-state has one perfect, homogenous language, becomes the means by which discourse is seized, and provides rationalization for limiting access to discourse" (Hearn et.al, 2018), will not only deny that linguistic diversity exists within its borders, but will put in place practices that prohibit such diversity. When English is the only language that is allowed to be heard, other languages and their entwined cultures and ideas are effectively silenced. "Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment and thoughts," declared the Federal Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1887 as he instituted English Only boarding schools in an effort to eradicate the Navajo language and Native American resistance to the U.S. government (Verkuyten, 2016).

The concepts of nation and nationality are themselves of post-Renaissance origin and they only carne to acquire their modern sense in the 19th century, largely in virtue of the geo-political climate in Europe marked by the spirit of colonialism and the ethnocentric sentiments aroused by the conquest and subjugation of alien territories and their peoples. As Morris et.al (2011) put it: "Nations are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such".

METHODOLOGY

A desktop literature review was used for this purpose. Relevant seminal references and journal articles for the study were identified using Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria entailed papers that were not over 20 years old.

FINDINGS

People are born into a global system which delineates geopolitical spaces as „nations". This is an objective description of an aspect of human experience. How this is subjectively experienced, understood and interpreted, however, is not determined by the mere fact of being born in a certain place at a certain time. Obviously the cultural and linguistic resources available and valued in the context of this location will condition the likelihood of acquiring some language varieties rather than others, but this does not in itself lead inexorably to a national, ethnic or linguistic identity (Bhugra et.al, 2005). From the researcher's perspective, there is a danger that, if political communities are viewed as deriving from a shared or common cultural heritage or tradition, the political actions they take are interpreted as motivated by a shared sense of 'ethnic identity'. Political interests then become construed within that „ethnic" framework. Conflicts may be represented as deriving from the ambition of one such group or collectivity to achieve

dominance over another, whereas in fact the range of political interests involved is much more complex than this formulation allows (Suzuki 2007).

If we abandon the notion that there are ethnic groups, and limit „nationality" to an administrative category, how then do we research the relationship between language use and social identification? Or, to put it another way, how is social research to obtain knowledge of the relationship between people's deployment of linguistic resources and their attachment to various forms of group identification? One recommendation is that research in this field should abandon the notion of a priori, already constituted ethnic groups, in favour of a notion of collectivities that sees them as arising politically and historically, from processes of subjugation, domination, dispossession and violence, not naturally and culturally (Laurentsyeva et.al, 2017).

Some sociolinguistic studies are concerned with fine-grained variations in pronunciation, where it is often found that the variants selected by speakers provide clues as to the social groups with which they would prefer to identify – although speakers will have a repertoire on which to draw, and will almost certainly vary their pronunciation in relation to the social context (Suzuki 2007). Cluster analysis can be used to identify patterns of similarity and difference across a range of speech samples, potentially providing evidence of the existence of social groupings which may or may not correspond with the collectivities assumed in classifications by ethnie or nationality.

Languages symbolize identities and are used to signal identities by those who speak them. People are also categorized by other people according to the language they speak. People belong to many social groups and have many social identities. A person may be 'a teacher', 'a Real Madrid supporter', 'a German', 'a Parisian' etc. Each group has its own language or variety of a language e.g. a regional group will have a regional dialect (which is a language variety), or a football team supporters club will have its own jargon. Speaking that language/variety/jargon gives a sense of belonging to the group (Bhugra et.al, 2005).

There is often a particularly strong link between language and a sense of belonging to a national group, a sense of national identity. In 'simple' cases, there is one 'national language' which is spoken by everyone with the same national identity. Most cases are however complex, and involve more than one language (e.g. Switzerland), and some languages are linked to more than one national identity (e.g. German).

'National' language(s) are taught in schools as subjects and are also used in schools to teach other subjects. For some children this means learning to read and write, and then speak, a different language from the language of the home (or a new variety of their home language), and in doing so there may be implicit or explicit encouragement to forget the language of the home (Laurentsyeva et.al, 2017). Such children are not learning their 'mother tongue', and because of

the link between language and identity, this can mean weakening or even forgetting the social identity created in the home, a regional identity or an identity brought from another country.

The use of the 'national' language for teaching/learning other subjects can be a barrier to learning those subjects for children for whom it is not the first language, 'mother tongue'. This may be caused by terminology and ways of speaking/writing in those subjects. It can also be understood as a link between language and 'subject identity'. Learning the subject is like joining the social group who identify with that subject (e.g. historians, physicists) and it is necessary to learn their language.

CONCLUSION

It is important to emphasize that it is human beings - and not languages or notional entities such as nations – who accomplish social action. In seeking to accomplish things in the world, social actors are (mostly) compelled to use language. Whenever they do so, however, there is an engagement with the linguistic resources available or accessible to them. Through this engagement they experience these resources in enabling and constraining ways. We conclude therefore that it is important to pay attention to the ways in which access to cultural and linguistic resources is structured, firstly through the deep social divisions among speakers of the same language and secondly, in the contemporary world, through the pre-eminent role of English as a global language.

Thus the distribution of access to linguistic resources is a political issue, not an issue of either the nature of language or the nature of knowledge. This has implications for how policy makers approach key questions of languages and social identities but also for how social researchers investigate these questions. Rather than starting from the claim that there are distinct languages and then proceeding to study, for example, their correlation with certain ethnic or national forms of identification, or how and in what ways they have become impure or hybridized, we advocate a different methodological starting point, one that sees the study of language use as a properly sociolinguistic exercise, namely that social action determines language use.

REFERENCES

Bilewicz, M., & Soral, W. (2020). Hate speech epidemic. The dynamic effects of derogatory language on intergroup relations and political radicalization. *Political Psychology*, *41*, 3-33.

Bhugra, D., & Becker, M. A. (2005). Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity. *World psychiatry*, *4*(1), 18.

Elaine Perunovic, W. Q., Heller, D., & Rafaeli, E. (2007). Within-person changes in the structure of emotion: The role of cultural identification and language. *Psychological Science*, *18*(7), 607-613.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2018). Chasing the butterfly effect: Informal language learning online as a complex system. *Language Learning & Technology*, *22*(2), 8-27.

Hearn, J., & Antonsich, M. (2018). Theoretical and methodological considerations for the study of banal and everyday nationalism.

Hong, Y. Y., Ip, G., Chiu, C. Y., Morris, M. W., & Menon, T. (2001). Cultural identity and dynamic construction of the self: Collective duties and individual rights in Chinese and American cultures. *Social Cognition*, *19*(3: Special issue), 251-268.

Kouhpaeenejad, M. H., & Gholaminejad, R. (2014). Identity and language learning from poststructuralist perspective. *Journal of language teaching and research*, *5*(1), 199.

Kramsch, C. (2014). Language and culture. *AILA review*, *27*(1), 30-55.

Laurentsyeva, N., & Venturini, A. (2017). The social integration of immigrants and the role of policy–A literature review. *Intereconomics*, *52*(5), 285-292.

Morris, M. W., Mok, A., & Mor, S. (2011). Cultural identity threat: The role of cultural identifications in moderating closure responses to foreign cultural inflow. *Journal of Social Issues*, *67*(4), 760-773.

Suzuki, S. (2007). The importance of 'Othering'in China's national identity: Sino-Japanese relations as a stage of identity conflicts. *The Pacific Review*, *20*(1), 23-47.

Verkuyten, M. (2016). Further conceptualizing ethnic and racial identity research: The social identity approach and its dynamic model. *Child Development*, *87*(6), 1796-1812.