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A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY



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Abstract

Language, as an identifying marker in a multicultural society, also constitutes a discriminatory factor in the same society. In order to prove that fact, a vast literature on the subject matter, coupled with direct observation and personal experience, resulted to a knowledge hereby interpreted in the light of the theory of constructivism. Language is an indispensable tool for communication amongst people anywhere on the face of the earth. In a society characterized by the multitude of languages spoken, language becomes an important criterion for identification of the members. How someone speaks goes a long way to provide information about their origin, ethnic group, social class, gender, etc. Though many languages coexist in such a society, there is often a dominant language which everybody speaks or ought to speak. This paper holds to the position that those who cannot speak that particular language or those who speak it with a strange accent, with a different intonation for instance, are the people at risk of facing linguistic discrimination (glottophobia). The recommendation supports the means to control or remedy glottophobia in a multicultural environment. Though it is a genuine feeling for anyone to desire his or her language to be spoken flawlessly even by strangers, we arrived at a conclusion that language discrimination is nothing but a killer.

Key words: *language, language diversity, linguistic identity, linguistic discrimination / glottophobia.*

Introduction

Language in any multicultural environment is a powerful tool for identification. The way one speaks or expresses oneself goes a long way to reveal their origin, the ethnic group to which they belong, their social class and their gender. In a multicultural society where many languages are spoken, there is often a major language that dominates others and obviously there are people who cannot speak the dominant language, or rather they cannot speak it as fluently as a native speaker would, that is with the right accent or pronunciation among other details.

Being an important medium for communication, language needs to be shared but the use of language depends on individual persons. Even in the midst of the same people speaking the same language, there could be some differences in the way each person expresses himself or herself depending on their gender, age, social and educational background. Through their speech, the

speakers are identified as belonging to a particular linguistic group; they are rated, assessed and classified according to how they speak the dominant language of the geographical region where they find themselves. This position paper aims at examining and showing how language though an identifying marker also constitutes a discriminatory factor in a society, despite the unifying characteristics attributed to it.

Methodology and theoretical framework

This research builds on multiple others, published and made available in books, journals, even online. Following a qualitative approach, we identified language discrimination as it is displayed in our society. It is a fact, observed and often discussed in a more natural setting that enables one to develop an opinion. Thus, the research method applied here is mainly by direct observation and personal experience as a member of a society where this social phenomenon occurs.

The theory that best suits the issue of language discrimination is constructivism. According to Piaget cited by Brau (2018), constructivism "indicates that humans create knowledge through the interaction between their experiences and ideas". He goes further to add that "knowledge is an intersubjective interpretation. The learner must consider the information being taught and - based on past experiences, personal views, and cultural background - construct an interpretation". In other words, beyond acquired knowledge through a literature review which could be considered as previous knowledge, we construct our own knowledge by experiences in the community because community plays a vital role in the process of making meaning (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Concept of Language

In the area of communication, language is the great tool that helps human beings to exchange or share thoughts, ideas, information, feelings with one another. Without language, it is practically impossible for members of a society to express themselves, communicate and even to interact. Robins (2020) on his own part defines language as:

A system of conventional spoken, manual (signed) or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression and emotional release.

This shows how vital language is in every society. Though humans depend on language and also use language on a daily basis, it is not an easy task to define what language exactly is. Nevertheless, language is considered to be a connector that can either build or tear down any society. In quoting Chomsky, Fabitz (2015) says that "language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements".

While attempting to give language a definition, opinions will differ from one scholar to another but some fundamental facts still remain unchanged: language is social, voiced, arbitrary, productive and creative, non-instinctive (conventional), systematic. As a dynamic system and the only means of communication among people in a society, language has 3 well known levels of characteristic. First, language is made up of the phonological level, which is related to sounds and their meanings; the second level is the lexical level comprising words and the meanings attached to them in sentences for effective communication; the third level is the sociolinguistic level recognized to be shaped by social factors like age and gender.

Fabitz (2015) further mentioned Henry Sweet who says that “language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, and this combination is answering to that of ideas into thoughts”.

Language as Viewed In the Society

Outside being a system of communication, language is also considered as a social phenomenon. Sociolinguistic is the area that is concerned with showing how the use of language is determined by some factors such as class, gender or race. Language is altogether social, cultural, and psychological and a language exists dependently on a group of people who speak it. In other words, language cannot be separated from human society. Language is the key component of social development, civilization and communication. There are so many functions that language can perform in the society, and vice-versa. Each of them exists because the other is there, so language and society are interdependent (Hickey, 2007).

Language is used all over the world every single moment, showing how it stands at the center of any interaction amongst individuals irrespective of the location and time. Therefore, it is impossible for there to be a separation between language and society, and there is no gainsay that language sustains a social relationship between people. Language is strongly linked with the members of the society where it is spoken, so much so that it becomes inevitable to have some social factors reflected in it.

Wolfram (n.d) described language as “one of the most powerful emblems of social behavior”. He also explained that through language, vital social information is sent out about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with. Furthermore, a person’s background, character, and intentions could be known based simply on the person’s language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of a single word. Nigeria for instance is known in the world to be one of the most linguistically diverse countries. In such a potpourri of languages, each one is unique in the structure that characterizes the language, and in the way it reflects the culture of the speakers. Everywhere, language is an instrument of identification, classification, labeling and branding, which shows the important nature of language (Dada, 2007).

The Concept of Identity

Identity simply defined is individuality, meaning who you are; it is the condition of being a certain person different from another person. Whatever makes individuals label themselves as members of a particular group is identity: social identity, cultural identity, religious identity, national identity and many more others. Language is known to be an essential factor that determines the identity of a person or a group.

Identity also refers to sameness. Being able to talk about sameness (likeness) within a group of people is a more complex attempt. Identity has everything to do with who a person is, the way they think about themselves, their view of the world and the characteristics defining them. We all have an image of who we are, a self-identity that is made up of our looks, personality, qualities, beliefs, style of expression, self-esteem, which all contribute towards making us unique in the eyes of others. There are basically two features characterizing identity according to Yahaya (n.d.), these are continuity and contrast:

- Continuity:

As long as identity matter is concerned, continuity is the ability to be the same person you have always been known to be over time, notwithstanding the location and situations. In this case, contexts do not affect the identity of the individual who remains the same in different places at different time under different circumstances. Under continuity are elements such as gender and ethnicity which are constant. Despite the fact that people do change, there are some aspects of social identity that ever remain unchanged like language and origin.

- Contrast:

Identity makes each person unique; contrast is what differentiates one person from another in the society. As a matter of fact, one's identity changes sometimes due to events that occurred, associations, influence, revelation of a truth etc. Though a group of people may share the same social identity, it remains obvious that as individuals there is something strikingly different from one individual to another, and that is the contrast. Thus described, contrast is part of what characterizes a person's identity as well as does continuity among other factors or features. If not well established and well-developed, identity can lead to identity confusion.

Language as an Identifier

In trying to define or describe a people or a person, language plays a very important role in disclosing their identity. Through language it is determined to which ethnic group someone belongs. Language has been a salient feature that defines membership and social identity. There are as many languages as there are cultures. Linguistic identity is an important aspect of identity especially in a multicultural society. It is language that helps express, share and preserve our culture, customs and

values. Culture and cultural values are transmitted through languages, therefore giving insight to who we are. Language is such a powerful concept that can focus the people's attention on specific aspect of the world, shaping their world view differently from another set of people speaking a different language. It cannot be overemphasized that language beside other functions it performs in a society, also fosters our feelings of group identity and solidarity.

Knowing a language has often, at several instances, helped people to identify with a specific group and to interact with the speakers of that language whom in other circumstances would not have done it. This explains why immigrants for instance have to learn a specific language in order to be accepted and to fit into a particular social setting. An article from Ukessays (2018) says that language creates social identity and serves as "a medium to gain self-esteem and power in the society". Through language one can obtain access to a society and benefit equal treatment with the native speakers. This invariably means that "language, the individual, and the society cannot be separated in creation of social identity". Apart from being a means of communication, language is part of one's culture and identity. Anybody can be identified through or by the language he or she speaks. In summary, our language is actually our identity.

Language does not only create identity, it goes further to constrain it as a result of being closely interwoven (Evans, 2014). Also, language determines how people relate among themselves and how they relate with outsiders, as well as how they are seen by others. The history of a people, their customs and traditions are carried from one generation down to the other on the wings of language as the only means to sustain the existence of a culture. In essence, language has a role to play in the formation of our identity be it individual or collective identity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that identity is a complicated concept to define and can change depending on the individual's change of environment, his/her extra knowledge acquired and as he/she grows in age (Edwards, 2009). In trying to explain how importantly related language and identity are, Quirk (2007) points out that identity is the most universal of all relations as it is common to every human being. He further describes the relation between language and identity as being obvious, unique, and unalienable like DNA is to each person. Language definitely is part of our identity because it often reveals a lot about us, it provides information about a person's social background, level of education, social class (Dada, 2007) as well as it connects an individual to his family, culture and belief.

Understanding Language Discrimination (LD) or *Glottophobia*

Naturally, language selects people according to ethnics. The place language occupies in our daily life cannot be overemphasized, even as it helps in shaping our experience in the society. The use of language or the mode of expression has a way of informing people on our origin, our social class, our level of education, our social background (Morlan, 2018). Language is actually considered to be a set of codes that only those who can decipher the codes can have access to the

content, which is the message conveyed in any communication situation. Be it as it may, no one up to that point can speak of discrimination, because discrimination is an artificial phenomenon which can be observed at various levels and which also manifests in diverse manners.

Language discrimination refers to the fact that a person would be unfairly treated based on the native language they speak, or based on the way they speak the dominant language of the area where they find themselves. Scassa (1994, n.p) rightly said:

Government language policies which promote a national or official language may also have a significant impact on those who are not fluent in that language. The idea of language as a symbol of the nation is common place; knowledge of the national language becomes a badge of membership, and lack of knowledge or proficiency is a marker of outsider status, disloyalty, and bad citizenship.

It is a clear act of discrimination whenever a person is given a certain treatment as a result of the language spoken, the accent used, and other characteristics related to their speech. Anybody can be a victim of LD and it can occur at any point in one's life; it can also involve a person's inability to speak a particular language in place of another. LD may not be recognized but it exists as long as language plays functions in society. The simple fact that someone does not or cannot speak the language of a certain group of people or location is enough to make such a person suffer an unfair treatment from the speakers of that language. LD can mar someone's opportunities, and can go as far as leaving the victim with a stigma (Scassa, 1994).

Multilingual Environment, a Harbor for LD

In Africa as a continent, there is hardly a society that is not multilingual: languages and dialects abound. Compared to the standard language, dialects deriving from it have a different pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. Just like skin color, gender and religion can be source of discrimination, so is language. A person or a whole community can experience rejection on the basis of subjective and arbitrary criteria. LD may be unknown to some people but in most societies it is still practiced and is seen as an illegitimate act. Yet, "the beauty of linguistic diversity is that it reveals to us just how ingenious and how flexible the human mind is (Boroditsky, 2018).

Otherwise called *glottophobia*, linguistic discrimination is invariably a way of rejecting another person's identity because language, accent, pronunciation are peculiar features directly related to a person, their origin, their culture and history. *Glottophobia* as defined by Blanchet (2019) is:

the despise, the hate, the aggression, the rejection, the exclusion of persons, negative discrimination rightly or wrongly founded on the fact of considering some linguistic patterns as incorrect,

inferior, bad as used by those persons regardless of the effects produced on them (n.p).

The language policies or linguistic ideology in force in a place goes a long way to be responsible for the practice of glottophobia in a location as found in Scassa's statement above mentioned earlier. Glottophobia is more about the difference in languages; it is a kind of xenophobia directed towards another language. Obviously, glottophobia has a stronger negative meaning than linguistic discrimination, and this shows how destructive it could be in any given society. The struggle to consider a language superior to another or better than another is only observed in a multilingual setting. Language discrimination or glottophobia does not encourage linguistic diversity. A classic example is the case of France where regional languages for a long period of time had been discriminated while French language was accepted. Even those speaking French with regional accents suffered marginalization or discrimination. Hooper (2013) in an interview with *Aljazeera* channel reported that there was an instance where protesters rose up in France to denounce the linguistic minorities' oppression. Those minority languages, though they had been pushed out, they are still spoken in some parts of France. We can mention Occitan which is known as the most widely spoken regional language, Breton, Alsatian, Catalan, Basque, etc. "Since the French Revolution, which was meant to uphold equality, it has worked as a cultural genocide, removing and now eradicating regional languages from public life" Hooper reported again.

There was an adage that "in France it is not what you say that matters but the way you say it". The questions one may ask are: does speaking with a regional accent make your French poor or wrong? Why should someone's pronunciation be humiliating just because it is not of the standard type? That accent and that pronunciation are part of what makes the particularity of a people, it is their identity. Due to these circumstances, some lawmakers went as far as asking the legislation to intervene. The French National Assembly has thus approved a law making linguistic discrimination an offence in the same order with racism, sexism, and the likes (France, 2018). Hence, glottophobia is regarded as a crime in France.

Non-speakers of a language are often aware and suffer the biases towards the standard way of speaking. For example, in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, there are 3 major languages (even though there are many other dialects that will not be mentioned in the present work): Ibibio, Annang, and Oron. The dominant group is the Ibibios, meanwhile Annang and Oron natives can speak Ibibio most of the time, but the reverse is hardly the case because Ibibio dominates every other language (dialects) in the State. Therefore Ibibio natives do not see the need to speak any of those languages, except in some special cases where for instance an Ibibio person might have lived in the midst of Oron or Annang community as a result of marriage or otherwise and thus had the opportunity to learn the language. We observed that when an Annang or Oron native speaks Ibibio, accent and pronunciation of words are usually what "betrays" them and reveals their identity. In addition to

that, deficiency in Ibibio vocabulary exposes the fact that they are not originally from Ibibio linguistic group. That is why, in an attempt to escape or dodge the vocabulary challenge while speaking Ibibio, an Annang or Oron person simply replaces that challenging Ibibio word by the Annang or Oron version of the same word, and that practice is called code-mixing. One thing to note is that code-mixing occurs in a multilingual setting seeing that speakers in such an environment share more than just one language. It has to do with using a word or a phrase from one language to another. Code-mixing (or code switching in some circumstances) is considered to be a sign of “incompetence”, “abnormal oversights on the part of bilingual speakers” (Kim, 2006, p. 56).

Identity and Discrimination Issues in a Multicultural Environment

The word multicultural describes a society with a complex range of issues related to culture, language, religion and every other challenge offered by diversity. Following the thought raised by Nye (2007), no society chooses to be multicultural, neither multiculturalism be avoided as long as that society is opened to outsiders or strangers. The most important thing is how matters arising are dealt with or the responses given to issues knowing that multiculturalism is “a process which is always contextual...” (p. 109). “Multicultural” is what describes the presence of culture diversity in a society. In other words, there is no particular culture everybody in a given society must be a part of. The culture differences therefore must be respected by everyone, accepting that the next person beside us might have a different culture. A multicultural environment or society is characterized by different cultural background, different ethnic groups coming together in that diversity of cultures and languages to contribute to the development and the building of their common society. There is an expectation that there will be a fair, equitable and respectful treatment of individuals and groups from any ethnic background (Gingrich, 1998).

Culture is supported, promoted and reserved by language. It is often said that culture is intrinsic to language. That is the reason why in order to understand words and expressions in a language one has to first of all understand the culture behind it. It is difficult to find an environment without identity or discrimination issues when many linguistic groups co-exist. The issue can concern just an individual or could be at the group level depending on cases. Though multiculturalism brings many advantages like adding colors to avoid a monotonous life, making exciting the difference and many other advantages, it remains a fact it does not always unite the people. Rather, it has been observed that multiculturalism has put people apart and has become a divisive factor in the society. The majority and minority dichotomy does not allow equality amongst the people; it hinders harmony and solidarity (Gingrich, 1998). Nigeria for instance is a multi-ethnic society with a well-known diversity of cultures and languages, all of which have exploded in conflicts sometimes, thus causing severe crisis between ethnic groups involved.

Avoiding or Getting Rid of Glottophobia

Glottophobia, languagism or linguistic discrimination is present in every society that knows language diversity. In such an environment, there are people who use language, dialect, accent to discriminate and exclude others. LD is lived differently from one person to another, in different contexts.

In some workplaces for instance it is often expected that everyone speaks the dominant language, even to speak it with no accent. This is how language is abused. Instead of a communicative instrument which it is meant to be, some groups of people use language as a tool to discriminate others. When an employer is asking employees to only speak a particular language even though their first language is different, such an employer is practicing language discrimination. The same discrimination occurs when a person is denied a business opportunity, access to a certain office, or government services, on the grounds that they do not originally belong to a specific linguistic group.

A lot of researches such as the ones conducted by Lanehart (1996), Zelmay (2017) have shown that discrimination based on the language an individual can speak or cannot speak, or based on their level of fluency can be illegal. The potential legal aspects of LD include the many reasons why LD should be avoided. Even outside the workplace, LD is to be shunned in order to ensure the trust and confidence of everyone. Those in leadership position in the society are expected to show the good example by being fair and equitable in how they treat other group members who do not speak their language. Employers should adhere to employment laws protecting employees from any practice of discrimination at work. Employees in the same institution or organization should refrain from using discriminatory language that offends one another (Kokemuller, n.d).

Some tips listed by Muller (2016) reveal in clear terms how to avoid LD, among which the following few had been traced:

- i. Do not keep certain roles only for a certain set of individuals. Whenever one is found fit or qualified for a job position, the same should be given to him or her notwithstanding the language/dialect they speak.
- ii. Never require for only one specific language to be spoken at all times (except for safety reasons).
- iii. Every society must be taught at various levels to avoid using language or expressions that could imply discrimination.
- iv. Workers whose English is not fluent for instance cannot be stopped from speaking their own language as that may be an indirect act of discrimination. But depending on the office occupied which requires communicating with clients, customers and

service users, it is of necessity that the worker be able to communicate effectively in English.

Linguistic discrimination is a sign of intolerance on the part of those who practice it. Now that the world has become a global village, movement of persons, movement of persons, ideas, languages, have become a normal and permanent thing. Diversity is henceforth the order as touching any area of life. What to expect from everyone on the face of the earth is to understand that 7 billion people in the world do not speak one and the language. Supporting language diversity is evidence that we work towards strengthening other people's cultural heritage and identity, be it at the local or global scale. Any group (or individual) where LD is observed should be regarded as xenophobic. Environment where there has been a history of LD, inscriptions should be put in public places, reading for instance "Language Discrimination Prohibited Here, Defaulters Shall be Sanctioned". This is a means of creating awareness and helping the people to shun LD, and to encourage building a healthy society for everyone.

Every member of a given society should be sensitive in speech, making deliberate efforts to avoid offensive or intimidating language; use appropriate slang depending on situations and who our listeners are. Respect to one another is paramount, as it provides sense of belonging and safety to everyone.

Conclusion

Language discrimination is a prejudice based on a person's place of origin, place of birth, culture, language, accent, pronunciation, etc. It is proven illegal to prefer a language over another, especially in a multilingual or multicultural environment. Whatever could be the reason for it, linguistic discrimination is bound to exist in such a society but the way individuals or groups would manage it is what matters the most. Every human being on the face of the earth has a linguistic group they belong to, which stands as the language they identify with, speaking and calling it their own. Having to learn another language is an additional skill which ought to be appreciated and encouraged especially in this era of global connect. Holding to details such as accent or pronunciation is not necessary, provided communication is established. It is a genuine feeling for anyone to desire his or her language to be flawlessly spoken even by strangers, but that gives nobody the license to practice language discrimination at any point in time. LD is a killer: it kills the moral, it kills self-esteem, and it kills confidence and productivity at work.

Certainly, there are languages that are known to be tonal languages. In such languages the lexical or grammatical meaning of words is found in the pitch of that word. In that case, a non-native speaker should be aware to use the appropriate tone to express themselves, the right accent and proper intonation in order to communicate accurately.

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