



Language as a Cultural Heritage and a Determinant of Identity

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Abstract: Language is a part of one's culture and identity. It plays a significant role in a person's individuality because it essentially communicates one's identity. Some ways in which we can acquire identity are the language, culture, education, and way of life. The sense of belongingness to a certain group originates in language. To try to impose changes upon a person's language is to alter the individual and personal identity. People are identified by their language and how they speak. Without language people would not be able to comprehend anything at all. Therefore, it helps in exploring and opening up a new window in life. Using language one gains the freedom to convey personal thoughts and feelings without any obstacles or limitations. It shapes one's psychological development, thoughts and emotions. It is an entity that connects an individual to family and renders a unique identity to oneself.

Keywords: Language, Identity, Endangerment of language, Mother Tongue Influence, Northeast India, Globalisation, Documentation

Language is a way of communication which is either spoken, nonverbal or written, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way. Communication done by making signs can be considered as nonverbal language. Basically, language is a system of communication consisting of "sounds, words and grammar" (Language); and people who scientifically study language are called linguists.

Identity is seen as who or what a person or thing is, and the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and expressions that make a person or group different from others. It is more than just the name and status, it is more profound than that. It consists of components like "physical, psychological, and social attributes", which can be influenced by the "attitudes, habits, beliefs and ideas of an individual" (Identity Formation). These components form the types of identity created in one person which we call cultural identity, professional identity, ethnic and national identity, religious identity, gender identity and disability identity.

Cultural identity is the identity of an individual or a group who is influenced by their belonging to a group or culture. Professional identity is attached to a profession with specific roles, responsibilities, values and ethical standards as accepted by the profession. Ethnic identity is the identification with a certain ethnicity, often based on a presumed common genealogy or ancestry. National identity is an ethical and philosophical notion by means of which all humans are divided into groups called nations. Religious identity is attributed to a set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual which is the outcome of his faith and mystic experience. Gender identity describes whether one perceives oneself to be a man, a woman or outside of the gender binary. It may be affected by several social structures, including the person's ethnic group, employment status, religion and family. Disability identity refers to the particular disabilities with which an individual identifies. It is determined by the particular disabilities that an individual is born with or receives it.

There is an identity called 'ethnolinguistic identity' which is important yet scarcely talked about. From Josiane F. Hamers and Michel H.A. Blanc, it is learnt that when language plays an important role in defining cultural or ethnic identity, it is referred to as ethnolinguistic identity (Josiane F. Hamers 2007). Thus, it can be viewed as a subjective feeling of belonging to a particular ethnolinguistic group for which the language spoken by the group is an important characteristic.

Language as a Cultural Heritage

It is through language that oral traditions and expressions which include proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and more are passed on from one generation to the next. Samuel Taylor Coleridge has rightly pointed out that "language is the armoury of the human mind, and at once contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future conquests" (qtd. in Maurer). In support of the role and importance of language, Article 2 of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage states:

Language transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO).

Through oral traditions, expressions and their performances in public languages are best safeguarded rather than their storage in dictionaries, grammars and databases. Languages can be preserved, studied and promoted through songs and stories, riddles and rhymes, and so the protection of languages and the transmission of oral traditions are very closely connected. Hence, the death of a language leads to the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions.

Language as a Determinant of Identity

According to Kirkpatrick, language shapes and reflects identities. It determines how people see themselves and how they are seen by others. It plays an important role in the definition of the identity of a person. By listening to the voices, accents and other features of how people speak, one can interpret their identities and categorise them. This categorisation can either unite or divide people because of the ethnolinguistic identity (Kirkpatrick's Review).

Language has been a salient feature of making group membership and social identity. From such group identification, people can know their identity as individuals and the ethnic group they belong to. For instance, people who migrate to other social settings find it difficult to fit into such settings due to language differences. For such people to identify with people within that social setting, it is necessary to learn their language to fit and identify with the rest. In his essay "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?", Baldwin pointed out the important role language plays: "It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity" (Baldwin 1979).

It would not be wrong to state that language creates social identity and transmits self-esteem to an individual within a society. Through language one is treated as a member of a particular society. Thus, it would serve right to say that language, individual and society cannot be separated in the creation of social identity.

According to Baldwin, language rule should be dictated by what the language has to convey rather than what is considered standard by the majority. This means that what we call as standard language is not superior to any other form of language in serving its purpose of communication among people. Therefore, one language cannot be considered good over other language varieties as long as those other varieties meet the need of the speakers in communication.

One factor that leads to language division and labelling is the need for cultural identity. Different people have different ways of life and language has been used to bring out these differences. It is mainly based on accent where a group seeking a unique identity due to their cultural differences adopts a new accent either on the same language which is called a dialect or forms a new language. In a language, dialect is symbolized by systematic differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary from other varieties of the same language. Accent has also contributed to language labelling. It can be defined as a form of a language spoken by a subgroup of speakers of that language. According to their accent people have been classified and given identification. For example, people of America are identified differently from people of England because of the way they speak the same language but with different accents. Thus, British English and American English came about.

There is a close connection between language and identification. Language defines one's ethnicity and status in society, and determines the power and position in society. It creates social identity and determines future possibilities because it plays a significant role in determining who a person is or can become.

Globalisation of Language

Globalization is a social process which is characterized by the interconnections that exist in the global economy, politics, culture, linguistics and environment. It is rapidly increasing in today's world. This increase in globalization has both positive and negative effects on language. These effects on language invariably affect the culture of the language in numerous ways. With globalization, languages and cultures of the majority begin to spread and dominate on a global scale which leads to the extinction of languages and cultures of the minority.

Delhumeau thinks that languages stand for important symbols of community feeling, enabling people to know to what ethnic groups they belong, and what common heritages they possess as one. Language is an essential medium in which the ability to communicate across cultures develops. Knowledge of one or more languages enables people to look into new horizons, to think globally, and to increase their understanding of themselves and their neighbours. Without language there would be no globalization and people would lose their cultural identity.

Today there are about 6,500 different natural languages. Out of which eleven of them account for the speech of more than half the world's population. They are Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, French, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, German, Japanese, Arabic, and English. English is distinguished from the other languages by having very a significant number of non-native speakers and it is the one most affected by globalization (Delhumeau's Language and Globalization).

On the other hand, there are many languages on the brink of extinction. More than half of the languages in the world are spoken by less than 5,000 speakers and many hundreds have as few as a dozen who speak the languages. As presented in "Language Issues - English as a Global Language" languages are slowly disappearing and it is estimated that a language becomes extinct roughly every two weeks because English has taken dominance over other languages in the world. Globalization is making the English language more important not just in universities, but in areas such as computing, diplomacy, medicine, shipping, and entertainment. No other language is currently being learned by so many people and the desire to learn it reflects people's desire to be identified with the bigger society.

The spread of English seems a positive thing because it promotes employment, education, modernity and technology, but it is also negative in as much as it leads to the gradual extinction of other languages. Some people think that speaking English makes them more respectable and honoured in society and thus they slowly shun the use of their own languages. This endangerment of languages can have a drastic effect on the cultures and identities of people because with the loss of language comes the loss of identity. Therefore, it is a dire necessity for cultures to preserve their languages. Despite the increase in globalization it is possible to preserve

languages through language classes and the promotion of the native language in homes, schools, schools and publications.

Endangerment of Language and Loss of Identity

An endangered language is a language that is on the verge of extinction as its speakers slowly perish or begin to speak other major languages. Loss of language occurs when the language has no more native speakers and becomes a dead language. If there is no one who can speak the language at all, it becomes an extinct language. It is noted that an extinct language may still be studied through the material available in the forms of “recordings or writings, but it is still dead or extinct unless there are fluent speakers” (Endangered Language). Although languages have been becoming extinct throughout human history, they are currently dying at an accelerated rate because of globalization, imperialism, neo-colonialism and linguicide. Gradually, it is observed that a ‘shift in a language occurs when speakers switch to a language associated with social and economic power or spoken more widely’ (Prestige; 2019) which results in the death of own language.

There are different stages towards the death of a language. The first step is *potential endangerment*. It is when a language faces strong external pressure, despite which there are still groups of speakers who pass the language to their children. The second stage is *endangerment* when there are only a few speakers left and children are not learning the language anymore. The third stage is *seriously endangered* when a language is unlikely to survive another generation and will soon be extinct. The fourth stage is called *moribund* (approaching death), and the fifth stage is the *extinction* of the language (Endangered Language).

Being aware of the necessity to preserve the languages there are people who are working hard for their promotion and preservation. Many initiatives and projects are taken up which are aimed at preventing or slowing language loss by promoting education and literacy in minority languages contributed by the language communities and linguists. All over the world, different countries have enacted specific legislation with aims to protect and stabilize the language of indigenous speech communities. Recognizing the fact that most of the world’s endangered languages are unlikely to be revitalized, many linguists are also making efforts to document these endangered languages of the world about which very little is known.

Like other forms of intangible cultural heritage, the survival of some languages is threatened by rapid urbanisation, large-scale migration, industrialisation and environmental change (Intangible Cultural Heritage). Digital life has led to the lesser use of languages at various events in life. Indeed, it is important to remind the world of the Scottish Gaelic saying that goes thus “*Am fear a chailleas a chanain caillidh e a shaoghal*” (He who loses his language loses his world) (qtd. in Robertson). With more and more emphasis laid on globalization and the digitalization of the languages of the majority, people are not only losing their socio-cultural identity but also losing their world itself because without having one’s own language a person loses one’s identity.

Promotion of North-Eastern languages

It is truly said that a different language is a different vision of life. According to “Northeast Today” there are approximately 220 languages which are spoken in Northeast India. The diversity of Northeast India lies in the fact that it is home to various languages belonging to five language families, viz. Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian (a small population of Tamil speakers in the Tengnoupal District of Manipur). The north-eastern states are largely inhabited by a number of native tribes which have their own distinct tradition, art, culture, dance, music, lifestyle, language and dialects.

Language is an important factor in the lives of the northeast people. Most of the tribes use language in oral forms as means of handing down their customs and traditions. It is the medium through which feelings and thoughts are shared. If languages didn't exist, interpersonal communication would have been very difficult or almost impossible. It is basically through language that we think and describe our understanding of the reality we perceive in our society and the world at large. The passing of information from one generation to another is done using language in spoken and non-verbal forms. But the sad fact is that a good number of languages in Northeast India are spoken by a population of below 10,000, which makes them very vulnerable to becoming extinct in the next few years. It is a growing fear that indigenous languages will cease to exist because they are undocumented, and with the death of the surviving speaker these languages will perish.

According to UNESCO (Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India), there are 42 languages or dialects in India with less than 10,000 speakers which are endangered and headed towards extinction. Sadly there are 12 languages from Northeast India which are believed to be on the brink of extinction with only a few thousand speakers. The endangered languages are *Tai Nora and Tai Rong* from Assam, *Mra and Na* from Arunachal Pradesh, *Ruga* from Meghalaya, and *Aimol, Aka, Koiren, Lamgang, Langrong, Purum and Tarao* from Manipur. This fact invariably suggests that the current group of speakers is the last generation of speakers if no remedial measures are taken for the promotion and preservation of these languages which possess rich socio-cultural values.

One of the reasons for the loss of languages is the assimilation of smaller languages with the majority language of the region. It can be compared to that of ‘the big fish eating the small fish.’ Owing to the fact of an extensive contact of a minority language with the majority language, speakers tend to shift to speaking the language which is spoken as the *lingua franca*. The minorities adapt and interact in the majority language in the fields of education, official work, movies, newspapers, music and mass media. Consequently, it is observed that the government and the stakeholders thwarted a stepmotherly treatment towards the speakers of a minority language. And very little has been done to safeguard these rich yet endangered languages (Northeast Today).

Bearing in mind the importance of languages, United Nations has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages with a special focus to preserve, support and promote indigenous languages at the national, regional and international levels as stated in one of the founding principles: “Integrating indigenous languages into a standard setting” (International Year of Indigenous Languages). UN has reminded

the world that languages are not only the first medium for communication, education and social integration, but also they reside at the heart of each person's unique identity and cultural history.

Conclusion

It is a growing concern to preserve the dying languages because along with the death of languages die the stories, traditions, food habits, medicines, and knowledge that the community holds. With the extinction of languages, people lose their identities and ways of life. The responsibility lies on each individual to be an ambassador for spreading awareness and working untiringly to revitalize the indigenous languages because there exists a broad connection between language and identification. Language defines the ethnic group that a person belongs to and the status in social stratification and determines the degree of power one holds in society. India is endowed with a rich cultural heritage and different language groups contribute to the diversity of its land and people. Therefore, all languages need to be promoted because they stand as the identification mark of the people. And thus, it is justified to say that language is an intangible cultural heritage and a determinant of one's identity.

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