

# Language and social identity: A psychosocial approach

Rusi Jaspal, University of London.

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**L**ANGUAGE seems to have two principal functions; it is, of course, an instrument of communication, but it can also constitute a means of asserting one's identity or one's distinctiveness from others. A common language may be the ideal vehicle to express the unique character of a social group, and to encourage common social ties on the basis of a common identity (Dieckhoff, 2004). Here it is argued that language can be a robust marker of social identity, capable of binding and dividing groups and that its salience may displace other (e.g. ethnic or religious) identities (Jaspal & Coyle, in press). It is primarily sociolinguistics which has concerned itself with questions of language and identity (e.g. Rampton, 1995; Harris, 2006) but here it is argued that a variety of social psychological theories of identity may complement and enrich the ongoing, primarily sociolinguistic, debate on the relationship between language and social identity.

## **Identity**

Tajfel (1978) defines social identity as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group'. More recently, it has been argued that social or collective identity arises when self-definition is focused upon a shared self-aspect, which may be inter alia a belief, a symbol, a psychological or physical trait, etc. (Simon, 2004). For instance, the salient self-aspect, upon which the social identity of an ethnic group is based, could be the belief in a shared heritage. Furthermore, social psychologists have argued that identity may be threatened if individuals' feelings of continuity over time, distinctiveness from others, self-esteem and self-efficacy are threatened by changes in the social context (Breakwell, 1986, 1992; Brewer, 1992). Here it will be demonstrated how these theoretical strands from social psychology may be useful in the study of language and social identity.

## **Language as a marker of (sub)cultural identity**

Several writers have emphasised the relationship between language and ethnic identity (Cho, 2000; Baker, 2001). Furthermore, the mother-tongue is said to be a particularly important aspect of (ethnic) identity since both are frequently viewed as being immutable and inherited from birth (Fishman, 1991). In some cases, the ethnic group might be considered an important group identity in early life; the value and emotional significance attached to that group is likely to be high, as the child is involuntarily socialised in the ingroup culture (Halliday, 1975). However, this is unlikely to be a universal fact since in some cultures other identities may be deemed to be more important or more salient; for instance, religious has been said to be a particularly salient identity among British Pakistanis (Jacobson, 1997). Accordingly, Jaspal and Coyle (in press) have found that Arabic, the language commonly associated with Muslim identity, may be viewed by British Pakistanis as a symbol of their collective religious identity.

Recently theorists have become attuned to the idea that identity is likely to be context-specific. To quote Cohen (2000), 'One can be Muslim in the Mosque, Asian in the street, Asian British at political hustlings and British when travelling abroad, all in a single day.' Consequently, identities within and outside of the home environment are likely to be qualitatively different. This is observable among adolescents, for instance. Adolescence is a unique period

in life, in which independent choices begin to be made and in which new identities are formed (Erikson, 1968). Due to the 'betwixt and between' nature of adolescence, it is a period of life which may be conducive to alienation (Calabrese 1987); in some cases, it may entail separation from the ethnic ingroup (e.g. British Pakistani) and from the dominant national group (e.g. British). Moreover, language can often constitute a marker of the distinct (adolescent) identity; for instance, it may reflect membership of a particular subculture, and endow members with a sense of distinctiveness from other (e.g. the ethnic and dominant) groups. This is exemplified by Hewitt's (1986) work on identity among British Black youth subculture; British Black respondents were said to speak a variety of English which differed from Standard English and from the creolised variety of English spoken by their parents.

Such language is particular to this subculture since it is neither inter-generationally transmitted nor associated with any particular geographical region. This perhaps echoes Epstein's (1998) notion of 'bricolage', which refers to the intricate repertoire of cultural elements, among members of young subcultures, which enables them to establish a distinctive identity. The linguistic dimension of this 'bricolage' is likely to be an important one. This is evidenced by the notion that outgroup members may gain entry or membership in the subcultural group through appropriation of the language associated with the group; this has been referred to as 'language crossing' (Rampton, 1995; Harris, 2006; Jaspal, 2008). Indeed, it has been found that some young British-born South Asians identify as members of this subcultural group on the basis of language, although they do not identify as 'Black' themselves (Jaspal, 2008). Consequently, in this context it seems that language supersedes notions of 'race' and ethnicity as determining factors for (subcultural) group membership.

### **A larger social category – nationhood**

Language has also been said to constitute a marker of larger social categories, such as the nation. Indeed, linguistic diversity is frequently perceived as a threat to national unity (Windisch, 2004). Languages may be invoked and used to signal group membership especially if groups feel that their identities are threatened; in these situations use of a given language may constitute an act of defiance. This is observable in the histories of Catalonia and Quebec, for instance. Thus, it is unsurprising that specific programmes of language planning may be aimed at homogenising the national group. During this process, minority languages may be stigmatised or even banned, as was the case in Franco's Spain, where the Catalan language was formally prohibited for almost four decades (Pujol, 1996).

This method of attempting to establish a cohesive national identity may be detrimental for minority group identity, since an important self-aspect, namely language, is often at stake. A language may be important to a group at a symbolic level. For instance, individuals may collectively lay claim to a language, which they themselves do not speak natively, in order to assert a symbolic identity which will differentiate them from others. Welsh nationalism exemplifies this notion of symbolic identity. Although just a fifth of the population actually speaks Welsh, the language is often brandished as a symbol of uniqueness and differentiation from their English neighbours. This is reflected in the bilingual signs and notices throughout the nation, even in predominantly English-speaking areas. Perhaps the symbolic use of the Welsh language safeguards individuals' sense of continuity as Welsh individuals, as well as their distinctiveness from their English neighbours (Breakwell, 1986). If their national identity is in any way threatened by the symbolic dominance of the English, perhaps the collective adoption of the Welsh language, even by individuals whose native language is English, allows them entry in a less threatening position.

### **Language attitudes**

The construction of a social identity on the basis of language is an intricate and complex process, in which the role of language attitudes must also be taken into consideration. In state-sponsored language standardisation, for instance, language is codified in a rather arbitrary fashion (Lodge 1993). A cursory glance at the Persian language, for instance, reveals the abundance of Gallicisms in the language, which is curious given that Iran was never colonised by the French. The explication is that the intellectuals who codified Modern Persian had studied in Paris and saw French culture as desirable which underlay their decision to integrate lexical items into the language. In terms of identity, it could be argued that this constituted a method of increasing the nation's self-esteem; French culture was highly regarded so maybe the incorporation of Gallicisms in the Persian language would improve attitudes towards the language.

Standardisers prescriptively evaluate language with the utopian vision that members of the linguistic ingroup will adhere to the prescribed rules. However, laypeople also evaluate language in accordance with other dimensions of identity (Jaspal & Coyle, in press). It is possible that speakers of stigmatised language varieties may accept and reproduce negative social representations of their own languages, which could in fact have negative repercussions for their identities (Breakwell, 2001). For instance, speakers of Andalusian Spanish, which is a non-standard, stigmatised language variety, have been found to evaluate their own speech less positively than Standard Spanish, which is viewed as the linguistic ideal (Carbonero, 2003). Since individuals are motivated to feel good about their identities, the negative evaluation of one's language, which can be associated with one's identity, may create psychologically threatening situations (Breakwell, 1986).

### **Linguistic group mobility – social mobility**

The negative evaluation of one's language or identity might result in the desire for social mobility, which in the present context might entail the acquisition or use of a language which symbolises a more positive identity. For instance, a study on bilingualism among Portuguese immigrants in California (Williams, 1980) demonstrates that Portuguese language maintenance among first generation immigrants is low; eight percent no longer speak the language fluently and reject the importance of the Portuguese language in their ethnic identity. In line with identity processes, this is perhaps not so esoteric; Breakwell (1986) notes that individuals might seek to deprecate the importance of aspects which pose a threat to the positive evaluation of one's identity. Since English is the desideratum for social mobility in the US, the importance of the Portuguese language may be downgraded in order to accommodate the English language. This phenomenon has indeed been noted in other cultural settings (e.g. Jaspal, 2008)

### **Conclusion**

It has been argued that language can constitute an important marker of social identity at various levels of human interdependence, e.g. subcultural or national. It is noteworthy that languages are not inherently 'good' or 'bad'; value and meaning are conferred upon languages by people, which in turn gives rise to pervasive social representations. People may or may not act in accordance with these representations; for instance, if a group or its language evokes negative social representations, a member of the social or linguistic group may seek social mobility through membership in a more positively evaluated group. The boundaries of linguistic identity are of course permeable; an individual may choose to leave their original group and gain membership of another by adopting a new language.

It has been demonstrated how social psychological theories of identity may enhance our understanding of the functions of language in various identity contexts. Identity processes may explain both group-based and individual-based decisions to adopt or to reject languages;

the overarching search for a positive social identity seems to underlie these decisions. Cultural groups and subcultures use language as a badge of membership, and nations brandish their standardised language as the emblem of their distinctiveness from other nations, even if the language only has a 'symbolic' role. Clearly, these issues merit further academic attention both at the individual and social levels; social psychology is fully equipped to address this complex area of study. In conclusion, it is hoped that the present paper will motivate scholars to conduct further theoretical and empirical work on language and social identity from a psychosocial perspective.

**Contact e-mail:**

**rusi.jaspal@gmail.com**

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