

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT, SHIFTING CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

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ABSTRACT: *This article attempts to offer a broad perspective on the link between language, culture, and identity across a multiplex of social groups. The relationship between language endangerment, death, and the potential impact on cultural identity is examined. Through the analysis of four pertinent research studies, the microcosmic connection between language and cultural identity is explored in several contexts and across several cultural fields. In particular, the positive and negative effects of a person's perceived dominant language is examined at length. The researchers conclude that language indeed impacts cultural identity, and vast collaborative efforts regarding language endangerment awareness, maintenance, and restoration need to be undertaken.*

KEY WORDS: collaborative efforts, culture, identity, language endangerment, language maintenance, language restoration

INTRODUCTION

Language Endangerment, Shifting Cultural Identities

The interrelationship between language and culture is well-documented in research (Boltayevna, 2020; Rangiz & Harati, 2017; Srivastava & Goldberg, 2017). Languages are used to transmit cultural norms and values, and our understanding of cultural norms and values helps us choose words appropriately. In this regard, language serves as a window into culture (Srivastava & Goldberg, 2017).

Due to rapid globalization, the world's linguistic landscape has drastically changed. "According to UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 230 languages went extinct between 1950 and 2010, Today, a third of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers left. Every two weeks a language dies with its last speaker, 50 to 90 percent of them are predicted to disappear by the next century" (Strochlic, 2018). Even more startling is the prediction by BBC News that by the year 2100 over 90% of the world's currently spoken languages will be extinct (Colls, 2009). Since language and culture are interconnected and interdependent, understanding the notion of language endangerment and language preservation will be of high significance for researchers who wish to study language variation for clues into language innateness, and the existence of grammatical similarities across worldwide spoken languages.

Four research studies were reviewed in this paper to explore the notions of language endangerment, shifting cultural identities, and revitalization efforts across different ethnic groups from around the world. In the first article entitled, "Language and Identity in Belarus" Brown (2005) attempts to understand university-aged Belarusians' attitudes towards the

Belarusian language and its effect on their cultural identity. In the second study, Hoare (2001) examines attitudes towards the endangered Celtic language, Breton with an emphasis on the effect of the Breton language on their cultural identity. The third study by Tannenbaum and Howie (2002) focuses on the association between language maintenance and family relations among Chinese immigrant families in Australia. In particular, emotional connectedness to one's mother tongue was examined through the use of family relationship tests and a language usage questionnaire. The final research study by Uzawa (2019) offers insights into Ainu culture revitalization efforts and what it meant for the Ainu language and culture. The author draws on her own fieldwork and offers insights into how Ainu culture and language is practiced by Ainu and Wajin (the majority Japanese) university students in a unique structure called Urespa in an urban setting at the University of Sapporo.

Language and Identity in Belarus

This study investigates the linguistic climate of Belarus by making a distinction between one's "mother tongue" and "native language" (Brown, 2005). The researcher suggests that Belarus is a country which has historically faced assimilation both linguistically and culturally in the form of Russification. The researcher illustrates this by discussing language policies which have served to quell the Belarus language dominance in favor of Russian. According to a 1991 census, 92% of people living in Belarus identify themselves as Belarusian, yet only 37% speak the language at home. Essentially, speakers of Belarusian have become a minority in their own country. The researcher examines this language shift, and whether a dividing line exists between linguistic identity and behavior, and how this line affects a person's sense of national identity.

The researcher administers a questionnaire to university students from eight different universities in the urban areas of Grondo, Minsk, and Vitebsk in Belarus. The participants were first approached in Russian as speaking Belarusian publicly. This point was associated with political and nationalist sensitivities. The participants were also given a choice to take the questionnaire in Belarusian or Russian. It is noteworthy to mention that the majority chose Russian (86.9%). Altogether, the questionnaire was administered to 559 Belarusian participants.

The researcher discovered that there was a higher rate of self-reporting of Belarusian as a native tongue (30.7%) as opposed to a mother tongue (6.6%). This difference was indicative of Belarusian functioning more as "a badge of ethnicity than a practical language" (Brown, 2005, p. 323). The researcher referred to a similar questionnaire issued in 1980 which indicated that up until 30 years ago, 73% of participants identified Belarusian as a native language, and 14% identified Belarusian as a mother tongue.

The current study also suggests that a higher percentage identify Russian as their native language (34.6%) and as a mother language (69%). According to the researcher, language shifting in Belarus is likely to continue, and the endangered Belarusian language could eventually die without "external sources in order to compensate for a pronounced absence of internal mobilization and maintenance of the language" (Brown, 2005, p. 324).

The study offers insights into the participants' perceptions of language function in relation to their cultural identity. The data obtained from university students in Belarus suggests that the Belarusian language is losing its footing as a language of pragmatic importance to the Russian language. However, despite the country's socio-economic circumstances, the Belarusian language still has a nationalistic value for the people of Belarus due to its strong ascription to Belarusian cultural identity.

An Integrative Approach to Language Attitudes and Identity in Brittany

In this study, Hoare (2001) examined young people's attitudes towards the indigenous Celtic language, Breton, and the country's official language French through questions of identity and how the future of the Breton language is perceived by the participants. The author argues that despite the recent efforts to revitalize the language, the number of native speakers of Breton is in decline due to the strong influence of the French language on people's daily lives.

In order to understand young people's perceptions of Breton versus French, a questionnaire was issued to 62 students from non-bilingual public schools in Brittany. The first part of the questionnaire focused on the participants' language use, attitudes, and identity, and the second part examined the participants' feelings about the future of the language through statements addressing "the importance of preserving the language, the possibility of compulsory teaching of the language, and whether it is more useful to learn a modern European language than Breton" (Hoare, 2002, p. 76).

The study employed chi square analysis to understand the influence of age, sex, and region in upper and lower Brittany. Furthermore, age, sex, language, variety, and region (ANOVA) was used to compute the results of both the questionnaire and listening test results. Finally, a statistical significance test called the Fisher Exact Test (FET), was incorporated to form a contingency table in which to analyze Breton identity compared with the independent variables such as age, region, and sex.

The results showed that 45% of the participants claimed to understand Breton to varying degrees, while 10% claimed to understand most or all of a conversation. Regarding identity, 14% of those from Upper Brittany, and 30% from Lower Brittany, considered themselves to have a strong Breton identity. The FET showed a positive relationship between Breton language skills and sense of Breton identity. 49% of participants claimed, "It was not necessary to speak Breton to be considered Breton."

In addition, 44 of the 62 participants distinguished between "being a Breton", and being "a true Breton" which the latter requiring some degree of language ability. Furthermore, many of the participants held positive attitudes regarding the preservation of Breton, yet conveyed little interest in preserving the language in their own linguistic ability. The majority of the participants felt that Breton-accented French was a suitable marker of Breton identity. The participants under fourteen years of age believed that first language (L1) speakers of Breton were "old," or "countryside" people, while the participants at fifteen years of age and over generally viewed Breton L1 speakers as "intelligent," and "well-spoken." However, it would be important to note that the exact percentages for those variables were not mentioned in the study.

The researcher concluded that the L1 Breton language community is an “aging one.” She suggested that the decline is the result of older generations’ failure to transmit the language to younger ones. The researcher argued that there was not a strong momentum towards restoring the Breton language despite the positive feelings towards preservation efforts. Just as the Russian language influence on the daily lives of Belarusians, the socio-economic circumstances resulted in the dominance of the French language and consequently, the endangerment of the Breton language in the region of Brittany. However, the researcher believed that Breton-accented French would still be a “reasonable” and “accessible” identity marker for the people of Breton. Thus, the restoration of the Breton language was not viewed as essential to maintain cultural identity.

The Association between Language Maintenance and Family Relations: Chinese Immigrants in Australia

Tannenbaum and Howie (2002) investigated how language maintenance correlated to a child's perception of family members among Chinese immigrants in Australia. The authors hypothesized that a child's feelings of positive affect towards family members directly corresponded to a preference towards using their parents' mother language which could explain varying degrees of language maintenance among immigrant families.

Furthermore, the researchers examined how a new linguistic environment affected family relationships among Chinese immigrants. The findings revealed that young children absorbed the new language with greater ease than their parents do and thus, they often became their parents' guides, translators, and representatives under the socio-economic challenges facing immigrant families. The researchers believed that children's language competence may be an important determiner for their perception of psychological and familial reality.

The researchers issued several tests aimed at evaluating perceptions towards family members, along with a questionnaire to establish language preference and usage. The data was collected from a sample of twenty-two boys and eighteen girls, between nine and twelve years of age from schools with a high proportion of Chinese-speaking residents.

The results indicated that family relations played an important role in Chinese language maintenance among immigrant children. A child's use of their parents' mother language was also correlated to positive feelings towards family members. On the other hand, higher self-reliance scores indicated a lower probability of language maintenance. Despite not being conclusive, the authors' argued that this association may be bi-directional. The authors claimed that close relationships among family members corresponded to a higher use of parents' mother language and its maintenance while mother-tongue maintenance was also associated with stronger family ties. In the same way, low maintenance of mother tongue was also indicative of a complete shift to English and thus, weaker family relationships.

What does Ainu cultural revitalisation mean to Ainu and Wajin youth in the 21st century? Case study of Urespa as a place to learn Ainu culture in the city of Sapporo, Japan

This study focuses on the revitalization efforts for the Ainu language and culture through the researcher's fieldwork in Hokkaido, Japan. The Ainu are the Japanese indigenous people based in the northern island of Hokkaido with a distinctive culture, language, and lifestyle than Wajin. To adapt to the harsh natural environment and cold winters of Hokkaido, the Ainu made their livelihood with hunting and gathering, developed a rich and unique culture and language of their own. However, the Ainu language is currently facing extinction due to political pressure, isolation, and prohibitions by the past Japanese governments in the 19th and 20th centuries.

According to Tahara (2009), "The government imposed a new way of life on the Ainu with prohibitions concerning hunting and fishing in 1868." This move profoundly undermined the Ainu culture and their traditional way of living. The government's main objective was to build a modern nation and assimilate the minorities (Uzawa, 2019). Therefore, special schools were built to teach the Ainu Japanese language and ensure their assimilation into the rest of Japan (Tahara, 2009). In 1997, the Japanese government finally passed a new law to protect and promote the Ainu culture and language. However, the law did not recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people of Japan until a new resolution to recognize the Ainu as an indigenous People was adopted in 2008 (Uzawa, 2019).

At present, the Ainu language is categorized as severely endangered. According to a poll conducted in 2006, "Out of 23,782 Ainu, 304 people know the language, and among these 4.6% feel they master it to the point of being able to teach it" (Tahara, 2009). Thus, over the years, revitalization efforts were ramped up to promote the Ainu language and culture. In this study, the researcher focuses on Urespa, which she describes as, "The first self-driven non-profit social initiative designed, securing a scholarship for Ainu students; at the same time, it aims for co-learning for both Ainu and Wajin students to educate professional individuals on any Ainu-related subject from history, dance, songs, storytelling to take place at Sapporo University" (p. 171). One of the goals of Urespa is to create a "multicultural social model" for both Ainu and Wajin students and thus, its operations are entirely run by students.

Urespa also provides an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in the Ainu language. Particularly, indigenous students with Japanese heritage and upbringing can study the Ainu language and practice it through songs, conversations, storytelling, and annual theater performances exclusively held in the Ainu language (Uzawa, 2019). According to the researcher, speaking the Ainu language through Urespa gives Ainu students a sense of self-acknowledgment of their cultural identity through co-learning opportunities with Wajin students. In the meantime, the multi-cultural social model of Urespa also allows Wajin students to learn about the Ainu language and culture. As students recognize the significance of the Ainu language and culture, they feel encouraged to take initiatives for the restoration and preservation efforts. Urespa is supported by the University of Sapporo, local and central governments, as well as private organizations through the Urespa company system (Uzawa, 2019). This multiple support structure suggests that the success of promoting minority

cultures and languages relies on a collaborative effort and thus, more emphasis needs to be placed on collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed for this research note offer valuable insights on how identity is perceived in linguistically changing environments, the harmful effects of dominant languages, the role of language on cultural identity and heritage, and the role of a collaborative approach for restoration and preservation efforts on indigenous languages and cultures. In Brittany, it appears that Breton identity can be achieved in Breton-accented French, yet perceptions of a “true Breton” are still linked to L1 Breton use. Since the language is mostly spoken by older generations, younger generations seem to have a less than positive view towards L1 Breton speakers. In this regard, the suppressive effects of the French language, which is spoken by the majority of the nation, cannot be understated. In the same way, Russian has become the main mode of communication in Belarus due to the country’s socio-economic circumstances. The dominance of Russian as the daily language has led to the endangerment of the Belarusian language. However, Belarusians still value their endangered language due to its significance for the Belarusian cultural identity.

The investigation of how language maintenance correlated to a Chinese immigrant children’s perceptions of family members revealed that strong family relations appeared to have a positive effect on children’s decision to maintain their parents’ language while development of the parents’ language also helped to strengthen family ties. Children’s mother language competence was also influential in their perception of cultural identity. Children from stronger family ties tended to embrace their Chinese heritage more while children from weaker family ties usually ended up embracing the English language and Australian cultural identity. Finally, the case study of Urespa offered a successful model premised on a collaborative support system for the Ainu language and culture restoration and preservation at the University of Sapporo. The Urespa structure provides a unique environment for both Ainu and Wajin students for Ainu language and culture immersion through various co-learning activities. The significance of the Urespa project is that it is supported by the university, local and central governments, and private companies. This collaborative support system sets a successful precedent for language and culture restoration and preservation efforts all around the world.

All four studies indicated that the dominance of the common languages spoken in Belarus, Brittany, Australia, and Hokkaido was harmful for the maintenance of the minority languages. This was linked to socio-economic factors such as the convenience of using Russian or French as opposed to Belarusian and Breton as well as promoting the Japanese language in Hokkaido to assimilate the Ainu. At the micro level, strong family ties were influential in mother-tongue preservation and cultural identity among Chinese immigrant families in Australia. This finding could offer a potential for cross-cultural research on family relations in Belarus and Brittany to gain insights into children’s language maintenance. On the other hand, raising awareness of collaborative projects such as Urespa can help raise awareness of the ways a collaborative support system can help with restoration and preservation of endangered cultures and languages at the macro level.

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