

To What Extent is Speaking a Heritage Language an Essential Part of Maintaining Ethnic Identity?

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Abstract

Colonialist imperialism and globalisation have been a linguistic and anthropological disaster, with large numbers of languages and cultures being completely wiped out. People have lost their voice, their lands and their identities. An examination of the literature investigating a range of linguistic groups, shows that language and identity are inextricably linked. People who have lost their heritage language have often lost their connection with their community, their identity and therefore themselves. They often have a lower level of education, and can experience social problems. In the past few decades, researchers have shown that for a firm identity to exist, it's crucial to have proficiency in one's heritage language. While this has led to several positive steps, including the United Nation's (UN) declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, these initiatives often stop at recognition, and few, if any, steps are actually taken to preserve and maintain ethnic identities and heritage languages.

As language and culture are inextricably intertwined an individuals' language is a huge piece of the puzzle that forms their identity. This is even more so in ethnic migrant communities or linguistic minorities in countries where people have been oppressed by colonisation for centuries and their native tongues silenced for generations (Brody, 1999). With colonisation and more recently globalisation heritage languages have become endangered and even lost forever (Brody, 1999).

It is only in the past few decades, that the ability for these individuals and groups to speak their heritage languages, has been recognized as an essential part of maintaining their ethnic identity (Lee, 2002; Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Phinney, et al., 2001; Reyhner, 2010). However, despite this recognition that heritage languages are of fundamental importance to individuals and ethnic groups by governments and even the UN, much more needs to be done to ensure their survival and safeguard the psychological prosperity of their peoples (Reyhner, 2010).

In order to investigate this further it is important to firstly identify what is a heritage language and to also determine what is 'ethnic identity' or 'identity'. The definition of a heritage language has been

disputed with some defining it as any language other than English (Clyne, 1991, as cited in Wong & Xiao, 2010), while others have described it as a language with personal or family importance that is spoken in the home and differs from mainstream society's. Fishman (2001) goes even further and divides the concept of heritage languages into three categories: "indigenous, colonial, and immigrant" (as cited in Wong & Xiao, 2010, p. 155).

The Linguistic Society of America (2002) also states that:

"The term 'heritage language' denotes a language other than English that is associated with an individual's ethnic or cultural background and a 'heritage speaker' is someone who speaks or understands a language (other than English) that was spoken at home" (as cited in Chinen & Tucker, 2005, p. 155).

They are therefore languages spoken by individuals, families, groups and communities other than the dominant language used in their particular society. In Australia, English is the dominant language but there are many other heritage languages spoken by individuals and groups in the community such as indigenous peoples and immigrants.

'Identity' is a very complex concept and not easily defined. Identity is not fixed but is "fragmentary, fluid and flexible" (Wong & Xiao, 2010, p. 155) and changes depending on the situation, time and who the subject is interacting with. Our identity develops when we become aware of our surroundings and how we differ from others and is a process that is continuously being created, adjusted and reassembled (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2003; Hall, 1992, as cited in Oriyama, 2010). We must also note that identity is internal and external, the way we see ourselves and the way others see us are two differently categorized identities. "Our sense of who we are depends crucially on what others think of us, we may resist, negotiate, change and transform ourselves and others" (Kanno, 2003, as cited in Oriyama, 2010, p. 77).

Above all, identity is about "belonging" (Weeks, 1990, as cited in Wong & Xiao, 2010, p. 155) and in this case, a sense of belonging to the heritage language community and ethnic group. This concept of belonging is not a natural occurrence but is socially constructed and inherited through one's ethnic group and language (Brutt-Griffler, 2005). For a strong identity and sense of belonging to exist it is therefore essential to have knowledge of one's heritage language and culture (Reyhner, 2010).

Since the beginning of history humans have sought to expand their power and territories, conquering other peoples' lands and establishing empires. The conquerors, upholding an "ideology of contempt" (Grenoble & Whaley, 1997, p. 9) for the indigenous peoples' so-called subordinate languages believed they spoke in barbaric tongues and forced them to assimilate. Most native peoples were forbidden to speak in their own languages or practice their own customs, which has resulted in an irreplaceable and devastating loss of language, culture and identity (Brody, 1999; Grenoble & Whaley, 1997).

Not only colonialism, but also globalisation has been seen as an evil that will destroy linguistic diversity and ethnic identity. While globalisation may appear to be an extension of Western imperialism this is not always the case. An example of this can be seen within the African continent where migration is causing the displacement of African languages. Indigenous languages are being lost and replaced with other

indigenous languages that are not necessarily a dominant entity but rather become the preferred language in the region due to human migration (Brutt-Griffler, 2005).

Colonialist imperialism and globalisation have been a linguistic and anthropological disaster, with European tongues obliterating and often exterminating not only the indigenous languages but also the people themselves (Brody, 1999). It is impossible to measure the extent of languages lost throughout history, although some linguists estimate that up to 5000 languages and distinct dialects have been lost in the last century alone (Brody, 1999). This language loss has been “the cause of intense grief and disorientation to hundreds and thousands of tribal people, who struggle to be themselves without the words to say what that means” (Brody, 1999). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) also estimates that if precautions are not taken and governments do not implement education planning, language programs and the necessary support, half of the 6000 plus languages spoken today will be lost by the end of this century (UNESCO, 2013).

In 2007 a long-awaited realization of international support for the decolonisation and protection of the rights of indigenous people, the ‘Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ was adopted by the UN. This declaration affirms among other things the incredible importance of language to indigenous people and states that they have:

“the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons”; and “the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (Article 13 & 14, as cited in Reyhner, 2010, p. 138).

The following year was also designated the ‘International Year of Languages’ and UNESCO’s Director-General, Koichi Matsuura stated “Languages are indeed essential to the identity of groups and individuals and to their peaceful coexistence” (Reyner, 2010, p. 138).

Research shows that people who can no longer communicate in their own native tongues lose not only their personal identity but their connection to their heritage community. As values and culture are inextricably linked to indigenous languages, this language loss and loss of identity also corresponds with social problems such as unemployment, alcoholism, breakdown of the family, depression, school dropouts and underachievement, crime and a mentality of victimization (Borland, 2005; Reyhner, 2010).

This destruction of language and identity has been recorded by Platero (1975), the first director of the Navajo Division of Education who reported the following in regards to Kee, a young Navajo man:

“Kee was sent to boarding school as a child where—as was the practice—he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and Summer, he lost contact with his family. Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many thousands of Navajos who were non-lingual—a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondant—without identity” (as cited in Reyhner, 2010, p. 141).

Many Native Americans, like Kee, have spoken of their sense of alienation and despair and how they have reclaimed their identity and heritage after their grandmothers taught them to speak their ancestral languages. “The use of the native tongue is like therapy, specific native words express love and caring. Knowing the language presents one with a strong self-identity, a culture with which to identify, and a sense of wellness” (Midgette, 1997, as cited in Reyhner, 2010, p. 142).

Reyhner (2010) also points out that students who are enrolled in Navajo immersion programs showed better communication skills, more respect, maturity and overall more responsible behaviour than those not in the immersion classes. Providing solid foundations for native students in their indigenous language and cultural heritage is imperative to “well developed and culturally healthy students” (p. 146).

In Australia, assimilation policies have been detrimental to both Aboriginal society and their languages and there are now only 20 non-endangered languages out of an original estimated 400 languages (Anonymous, 2003). Government policies which practiced schemes resulting in the ‘Stolen Generations’, where children were forcibly removed from their families and homes to be moved to missions and brought up by Whites in the hope to cleanse and purge the ‘aborigine-ness’ out of them. These policies have proved to be immeasurably destructive and the children who were removed from their native communities were found to have a lower level of education, three times more likely to have a criminal record and twice as likely to be involved with drugs (Bereson, 1989). As one removed child looking back said:

“I’ve got everything that could be reasonably expected: a good home environment, education, stuff like that, but that’s all material stuff. It’s all the non-material stuff that I didn’t have—the lineage ... You know, you’ve just come out of nowhere; there you are” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission., 1997, p. 11).

A whole generation of Australian aboriginal people who have lost their ethnic languages and community ties, they have no sense of belonging, no sense of (ethnic) identity (Young, 2009).

Fortunately, in the past 20–30 years there has been extraordinary interest in the connection between language and identity resulting in a substantial amount of research (Leeman, Rabin & Roman-Mendoza, 2011). With this recognition that the correlation of language and ethnic identity are of paramount importance, indigenous groups all over the world have begun to find their voice, establishing education programs and immersion classes in the hope to not only save a lost generation but to leave a legacy of their heritage and language to future generations (Reyhner, 2010).

Although the ‘Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ is an important and positive step, many nations that signed the declaration have so far failed to provide any or very little support. It seems in some cases support does not extend beyond rhetoric and very little has been done to improve the plight of indigenous peoples (Reyhner, 2010). More funding and support are needed to save and cultivate endangered indigenous languages and to heal the negative effects of colonialism and assimilation that have disrupted and often destroyed indigenous communities. Only with this knowledge of their heritage languages will the identities and all-round well-being of future generations be protected (Reyhner, 2010).

The issue of language loss and identity is not confined only to indigenous people but also to minority

diasporic communities who have uprooted themselves and migrated to other countries. In this case language loss refers to the loss within a small group or on an individual level, not an endangered language. For even though the language may be lost within an immigrant group it still survives in the country of origin. Generally, immigrants desire their children to learn and be proficient in the new country's language but at the same time they hope they will be able to learn and maintain their heritage language (Lee, 2002). However, maintaining heritage languages within immigrant communities when the language outside differs and is dominant is a challenging process and parents face many obstacles in raising their children bilingually (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Lee, 2002).

For bilingualism to be successful and heritage languages maintained the languages need to be used consistently, support is needed from family, school and other social groups. Maintenance of heritage identity and the language being recognized and valued by society are also important factors (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009).

Often the immigrant culture greatly differs from and even conflicts with the new culture and the children of these migrants face the difficult task of ascertaining who they are in both cultural and social perspectives (Bosher, 1997). They are also confronted with the complex task of adapting themselves and determining their identities in both their original cultures and the culture of their new country (Phinney *et al.*, 2001; Borland, 2008). "The degree to which immigrant youth are able to maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to the majority culture has often been cited as critical to their self-esteem, psychological well-being, successful adjustment to a new society, and academic success" (Bosher, 1997, p. 593).

As Morrow (1997) notes in her study about post-World War II immigrants to the United States (US), "to become fluent in English is not only to curb the imagination but to control the emotions and, significantly, to move further away from both the mother and the mother-tongue" (p. 182). Immigrants often feel like an outsider in both their ethnic and newly found communities, being trapped between two languages and two identities they face linguistic identity shifts that are negotiated and passed with great difficulty (Morrow, 1997). Some feel that they will never be able to fully assimilate in the new country due to their visibly different physical appearance, ie. for example, Asians in a predominantly white society, but at the same time they don't feel a sense of belonging in their home countries either (Lee, 2002).

Many of these second-generation immigrants deal with their identity by finding a balance between their old and new cultures. Ideally, they adjust to the new culture while acknowledging and keeping their ethnic background as Lee (2002) states "The process of ethnic identity retention and acculturation do not have to be mutually exclusive, but may stand side by side in the form of biculturalism" (p. 128). However, for this to be successful, society must recognise the existence and needs of these culturally mixed communities, encouraging their ethnic identities rather than forcing them to conform to the new country's ways (Lee, 2002).

While proficiency in the new country's language is imperative for success in the new society, research has also shown that development and proficiency in their heritage language and cultural maintenance among first and second generation immigrants plays a fundamental role in successful adjustment to the

new society (Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Phinney *et al.*, 2001).

“Language is perhaps the most frequently cited contributor to ethnic identity” (Phinney *et al.*, 2001, p. 137). and most importantly it is essential to maintain smooth family relations and social interaction within the same ethnic group. A study by Oh and Fuligni (2010) into Latin American and Asian background immigrant adolescents in the US showed that a shift towards English monolingualism resulted in communicative problems and family relationship disruptions (Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Phinney *et al.*, 2001). Although the immigrant children usually become proficient in the new language, with often native-like abilities, their parents often have only limited communicative skills. Increasing numbers of first-generation immigrants are therefore forced to speak to their children in the dominant language even though they have very limited proficiency. They cannot communicate effectively and so communication in the parent-child relationship, as well as the relationship itself breaks down (Fillmore, 1991). Second-generation immigrant children and adolescents who were able to speak and maintain their heritage language ability experienced less family conflict, more family solidarity and a feeling of connection to their ethnic group (Oh & Fuligni, 2010).

The family unit is the most influential social contributor in influencing children, and adolescents’ ethnic identity is greatly affected by parental attitudes (Phinney *et al.*, 2001). Immigrant parents who believed their ethnicity to be important and who actively participated in their ethnic community and ethnic organizations, had a positive influence and the children of these immigrants were found to have a higher ethnic identity (Alba, 1990; Bankston & Zhou, 1995, as cited in Phinney *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, immigrant children that are able to learn and maintain their heritage languages have been found to have a stronger identity in both their home culture and the host culture (Lee, 2002).

Another factor which contributes to heritage language maintenance is the importance for the speakers to have positive attitudes and feelings towards the language and its use (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). These may be fostered by consistent parental language use, trips to the home country, association with use to particular interlocutors, for eg. grandparents, and exposure to heritage language media such as books, magazines, TV programs etc (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). These things also provide a purpose for the use of the language which acts as a major contributor in motivating the speaker to maintain their heritage language (Lee, 2002).

As immigrant youth begin to spend more time outside the home and their focus moves from family to peers their use of their heritage language decreases (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Lee, 2002; Phinney *et al.*, 2001). The more proficient they become in the host country’s language the less likely they are to maintain or converse in their heritage language and generally by the third generation speakers will only speak in the dominant language (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Lee, 2002).

In the past, education and maintenance of heritage language has been the responsibility of individuals and the ethnic communities themselves (Lee, 2002). However, in recent years language educators have finally realised the importance of heritage languages, not only to their individual ethnic groups but to the broader community, considering them to be both a social and national asset (Brecht & Ingold, 1998; Brecht

& Walton, 1993). In spite of this recognition minor heritage languages that are spoken by only a few in the greater population are considered to have a lower status, they are continually neglected and not supported and are therefore most often lost to the dominant language (Zhang, 2012). A few successful examples of less prestigious languages and heritage identities being maintained can be seen in regards to the languages of Basque and Catalan in Spain and Welsh in Wales (Grenoble & Whaley, 1997; Wardhaugh, 2010).

Despite the overwhelming volume of research that links language to ethnic identity some academics and researchers disagree and argue that language and culture are inherently not related and exist independently to one another (Lee, 2002). They question the link between language and identity and contend that even though language may be lost, one still remains a member of the ethnic group with no loss to their identity (Guitart, 1981, as cited in Lee, 2002). Hoffman (1991) believes that proficiency in the heritage language does not necessarily guarantee knowledge of the heritage culture and that bilingualism and biculturalism exist in varying degrees (as cited in Lee, 2002).

Lee's (2002) study showed that heritage language maintenance is an individual process that differs between people depending on their upbringing, surroundings, attitudes and experiences. People who show a stronger attachment to their heritage, a stronger ethnic identity, generally speak their heritage language more proficiently than those who don't share a strong sense of ethnic identity. People's country of birth also often effects their feeling of ethnic identity and language maintenance of those born in the old country showed more ethnic identity and allegiance to their heritage culture over that of the new country (Lee, 2002).

I believe that there is a fundamental association between language and identity and that some proficiency in one's heritage language is essential in maintaining one's ethnic identity. I also agree that biculturalism exists in varying degrees and that heritage language maintenance and identity are interrelated and interdependent on each other (Lee, 2002). The ability to be able to communicate in one's heritage language or the lack thereof will influence and affect one's relationships within families and the ethnic community. A sense of belonging that comes with the knowledge of one's culture and heritage language will ensure psychological well-being, mental stability and success in the new country (Bosher, 1997).

If identity is a fluid and flexible concept where an individual can alter their behaviour to suit a particular social environment, I think it is also possible for ethnic identity to exist in varying degrees (Wong & Xiao, 2010). Biculturalism as well as their level of bilingualism will differ from individual to individual and some will feel more like a member of the new country while others may feel more belonging within their heritage group. One thing is certain, that one's language and heritage culture are interrelated and the maintenance of one essentially depends on the maintenance of the other (Lee, 2002). Heritage language maintenance is not only the base for a strong ethnic identity but the backbone of success in both the family and society within all minority groups, both migrant and indigenous (Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Phinney *et al.*, 2001; Reyhner, 2010).

People endeavouring to raise their children in a heritage language or bilingual environment face numerous hurdles that they often cannot conquer alone (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). More support and

recognition is urgently needed from governments, educators, and society, to promote, educate and maintain the many indigenous and minority languages that are endangered, in order to stop them from being silenced forever (Reyhner, 2010). As language and therefore heritage languages are an essential part of one's identity, they must be saved and encouraged in order to ensure the overall well-being of all people (Bosher, 1997).

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