

Language Socialization

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Abstract

This article outlines the field of Language Socialization and its connection to Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) in Japan. We begin with a historical account of the study of language and society, noting the differences between psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Then some major contributions to Language Socialization studies since the 1980s are discussed, especially noting the role of language in education. Finally, some suggestions are offered on the relevance of a language socialization perspective to the teaching of English in Japan.

Introduction

All human beings belong to groups. We are born into a group, the family, and experience several other groups as life proceeds: school, company, possibly other groups based on religion, community, cultural or leisure interests, and often a new family. For long periods we are simultaneously members of two or more groups, for example family and school, new family, original family and company. From membership of one or more groups we derive our social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986, McNamara 1997, Norton and Toohey 2011). Thus a person may describe or conceive of him or herself according to region,

class, ethnicity or nationality in various situations.

An equally fundamental point is that all human groups communicate with language. There are at least two aspects to this. Language is firstly a crude tool for achieving goals, from the basic need of a child for food to the expression of more complex and abstract ideas such as creating a business plan. Another more psychological aspect is the role of language in creating and maintaining social identity.

The process of training in the ways of a group is known as socialization. When we are fully socialized we are able to behave in a way which is approved by the group, and which assures us successful membership of the group. While this training is largely given by example, it is also carried out explicitly through language. We receive instructions from our carers regarding suitable behavior in various situations. In other words we are socialized through language.

At the same time another process is unfolding, namely our acquisition of the language of the group. Thus we are socialized into language. For years children are trained in language use which is deemed correct by their carers. Gradually they understand that their language norms are not necessarily shared by all users of that language. This can relate to either phonology, especially regional dialect, or vocabulary choice or grammatical preferences. So in total our language use implies group membership. This develops in parallel to our awareness of the existence of different norms of behaviour of different groups in society. At the same time, when we meet other people our language is a very important signal which is perceived and interpreted by those we talk to, and to which they react in deciding how to behave toward us. The mechanism of the social role of language, or “how language both presupposes and creates new social relations in cultural context” (Rymes 2010) is known as Language Socialization.

The study of Language Socialization

Language Socialization research is a relatively new field, dating from the 1980s. For many years language acquisition research was fundamentally a branch of psychology. Its particular concern was the development of children's first language, providing descriptions of the stages of language development. (Bloom 1970) One major theme of debate was the explanation of linguistic competence in children. Does it come from innate mental processes, or rather from the child's environment? (Chomsky 1965, Pinker 1994)

Quite separate from this field of psycho-linguistic research was the study of socialization. This was part of anthropology, which studied many different societies, seeking to explain how children acquire the skills needed to participate in society. Famous studies examined several non-Western societies such as the South Pacific island of Samoa (Mead 1928), and Africa (Levine et al. 1994). However, language acquisition was not included as an integral part of the socialization process. Accordingly, mirroring this sharp division between psycholinguistics and cultural anthropology, the sociocultural aspect of children's language development received scant attention.

The new field of sociolinguistics, emphasizing the social role of language, arose in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. Various concepts such as "communicative competence" (Hymes 1972) to replace the earlier less nuanced "linguistic competence" and the concept of a "speech community" in which members participate in "speech acts" (Gumperz 1968) provided the analytical tools to understand how language functions in social groups.

The outcome of this period of research was a new umbrella concept, language socialization (Ochs and Shieffelin 1984). This notion has two complementary parts: socialization through language and socialization into language. Language learning makes us group members but simultaneously group membership

moulds our language. Researchers in this field study children's talk to show how their speech displays the ideas approved by the community.

Two major contributors to the anthropological study of language were Ochs and Shieffelin. One example of their work is their contribution to one aspect of child first language acquisition. It is widely held that children learn their native language easily because their mothers speak a specially simple form of the language to them known as "baby talk" or "motherese". However, in their research among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, and in Samoa, Ochs and Shieffelin found that this simplified type of speech was conspicuously absent. In its place they found that caregivers (mothers and other relatives) taught their children to speak by telling them to listen to various conversations around them, and then to repeat what they heard. These observations led the researchers to suggest a general typology of language socialization. Communities are either situation-centered or child-centered. The Kaluli community is situation-centered, encouraging children to adapt to social situations, whereas the Western approach is child centered, adapting to children's needs. Furthermore, this is not just a linguistic phenomenon but an example of general cultural values. For example, in Kaluli ideology people of higher status do not adapt to the needs of lower status community members. Going a step further, Ochs and others (2005) have suggested that some Western language socialization practices do not help children's language acquisition, and indeed in some cases, such as with autistic children, may be harmful.

In addition to its connection with first language acquisition, language socialization is also related to linguistic anthropology. Anthropologists point out that children's experience of growing up in a society is shaped by many influences, some social (the family or school) some economic (the economic role of the family or country), some public (the role of the state) and some private (the family). However, individuals have some capacity to change

their situation; Giddens (1979, 128) theorizes that “the familiar is created and recreated through human agency itself.”

A key concept in linguistic anthropology is *indexing*. By this is meant that when a person uses a certain word or grammatical form it is related to a social situation or a way of thinking (Hanks 1999). In some cases children notice these links, and in others parents explain the indexical meaning of certain words. For example in the UK a child’s use of phrases such as “my coat fell on the floor” is usually corrected by a middle-class parent to “your coat fell on the ground”. When pressed for an explanation, the parent may say “It’s wrong” or even state the indexing to class-specific behavior “we don’t say that” or “nice people don’t say that.” This type of training has been noticed in many communities, for example among Hassidic (Fader 2001) and expatriate Chinese people (He 2001).

One important part of the use of language in a society is the use of literacy. It has been suggested that the introduction of literacy changes the structure of a society and also the attitudes of its members. Change has been observed in many societies such as Polynesia (Besnier 1995), and also in the industrialized world. Heath (1983) studied two very different ethnic communities in the Eastern USA, concentrating on their literacy expectations and values. He concluded that attitudes to literacy in the home strongly influence a child’s progress in school.

As the world has globalized, people of different languages have come into contact with each other more frequently, and previously remote and isolated communities have been exposed to outside influences. This of course is not such a recent trend, but has occurred throughout history as empires have expanded or traders exchanged their goods. Indeed it has always occurred where language groups live in proximity as they do in Europe and in parts of Asia. Thus language changes under outside influence has been studied, for

example in the Caribbean islands (Garrett 2005). Similar phenomena of contact between different languages and cultures naturally occur when groups of people emigrate, and so a rich literature of research into language maintenance and shift in the USA has produced many insights. How do children feel about their identity, and how does their community try to convey their language and culture to the next generation? For example Mexican (Baquedano-Lopez 2001) communities and Chinese (He 2001) groups have different ways of perpetuating their culture. Naturally the language and values of the host community often run counter to those of the immigrant group, so there is a complex set of forces at work.

Language socialization in Education

We can summarize the phenomenon of language socialization by saying that it occurs when different groups or individuals come into contact. Alternatively using more general terms, we can say that it “transpires whenever there is an asymmetry in knowledge and power.” (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2010). The most obvious differences in knowledge and power are either between a young individual as the host group, that is to say between children and their parents, but it can also apply to a minority and a majority group, such as immigrants and the host community, or groups whose status is defined by their age and professional position as is the case of students of all ages and their teachers. Thus the school is a locus of language socialization.

There have been two main approaches to studying language in schools. One uses an ethnographic focus, as in Ochs’ (1988) analysis of “Speech events” between parents and children. The second approach is a semiotic one, pointing out how sign systems function. The first approach has helped us to understand

the educational performance of different social groups, as in Wortham, 2003. The semiotic approach has helped us to understand that children do not simply learn one linguistic system, but have to deal with many ways of speaking (Wortham 2005).

A language socialization approach can help us to understand the complex processes at work in classrooms. This is especially true in language classrooms, where two cultures meet. All participants in classrooms have their own identity or multiple identities, based on gender, nationality or class. Especially in teaching by non-native speakers we encounter the additional issue of native and non-native speaker teachers of a language. In one study by Duff and Uchida (1997) non-native speaker teachers working in a language school in Japan were questioned in order to understand their perceived roles and their grasp of the nature of the culture they were bringing to their students. The authors started from the standpoint that “identities and beliefs are co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language.” (452) One aspect of identity was the issue of classroom culture. The teachers tried to create student-centered classrooms. However, they did not like the occasions when they lost control of classroom events.

It is not only the teacher’s attitudes and beliefs which play a role in classroom language learning. The learners, too, bring ideology to their role. This may be based on gender, class or nationality. Thus for example it has been found both anecdotally and in research that Japanese women learning English in Japan approach English language learning as a type of liberation from what they see as the restrictions of their own language and culture. McMahill (2012, 312) comments that young Japanese women consider that foreign language learning “offers them a linguistic space for reexamining more consciously the norms of gendered speech and identity in Japanese.” Conversely, non-Japanese students of Japanese are influenced by their perception of Japanese social norms. On

example was pointed out by Ohara (2001) in relation to pronunciation. She showed that female English native speakers refused to adopt Japanese women's pronunciation norms, especially the use of a higher pitch than in English, because they considered it submissive and demeaning.

We see therefore that both the teachers and students bring their own cultural ideology to the classroom, and that these preconceptions, whether unconscious and innate or conscious and articulated, affect what happens during the process of language learning.

Language Socialization and ESL

How can language socialization insights help the language teacher to be more effective? Firstly we need to be aware that our students have learned their native language comparatively recently, and have been socialized explicitly by their parents and teachers. Thus they are keenly aware of the categories of their language, such as, in the case of Japan, male/female language and the vital distinction between superiors and subordinates on which choices in polite language are based. A special situation occurs in higher education, where many students have had their first experience of part-time work. Because this is mostly in service businesses such as convenience stores and restaurants, they have had to rapidly master polite language which they had previously only experienced passively, as customers. Thus they have learned the practical use of categories which they may only dimly remember from school lessons and parents' advice. These linguistic categories can help the teacher to introduce the English gender-based language and polite expressions. For example, whereas most basic English is shown in text books as being used identically by both genders, we do not have to go far before gender-specific language arises. One

example is the language for accepting invitations, where “I’d love to” is a typical female response and “Sure” is more likely to be male.

On the other hand, some of our students’ ideological presuppositions about English need correction. From popular culture they may form the impression that English interaction is always is very casual and the language simple, in contrast to the complexities of Japanese. This of course is an oversimplification; in English the same familiar/polite distinction arises, albeit with very different grammatical expressions. For example, when offering something to someone we say “Would you like ...” in a formal situation and “Do you want ...” in a familiar one. Similarly they need training in forms of address. Because we do not address teachers as “teacher” in English speaking countries, this does not mean that there is no distinction of familiarity and formality. On the contrary, though there are local differences, in general, teachers are addressed as *Mr.* or *Ms.* rather than by their first names.

In these ways we are socializing our students into language, teaching them the social rules of using English, which overlap considerably with Japanese. Equally we socialize them through language, in other words teach them about a different society through studying its language. One important part of interaction in a Western society is the mastery of small talk. As can be observed from any school staff room in Japan, conversation between females is closer to the Western model, used as a social lubricant, whereas as males only speak when it is absolutely necessary and often relapse into silence without any sign of embarrassment. But not only is the amount of small talk different; we need to educate our students into the techniques of this important skill. First there is the choice of topics. Whereas asking an adult person his or her age is normal in Japanese social interaction, it is unacceptable in the West. Equally, asking about someone’s family in a business small-talk situation (such as a coffee break) is not uncommon in the West, whereas in Japan it is rare. These cultural norms

can be taught along with the necessary repertoire of conversational fillers: starting with “so”, continuing with “and,” changing topic with “by the way”, and replying with “really?” or “how about you?” among others.

A similar set of cultural facts and linguistic skills are necessary when teaching telephone language. Without being too alarmist or pessimistic, we can point out that the reason for answering the telephone with *Hello?* rather than one’s name is that security is poor in the West and we have to be vigilant for hoax and harassment calls. This may come as a surprise to our young students who are used to the apparent lack of privacy in today’s social media.

In addition to language socialization insights informing their own classroom teaching, a social perception of language can help teachers to understand their own prejudices. Native speaker teachers are naturally representatives of their society and culture as well as simply language experts, but they must remember to be tactful. Inevitably native speakers are aware of the virtues of their language. For example French speakers emphasize the clarity (*clarté*) of their language, while other languages are said to be beautiful, subtle or logical. English speakers are brought up to believe that their language is the most important in the world. Certainly it is widely used as a *lingua franca*, especially in Asia. But this must not make us believe that we are culturally superior, adopting an outdated imperialist attitude. (Pennycook 1994) Especially it must not lead us to denigrate the local culture. This can be done when it comes to poking fun at loan word use, such as the Japanese “back mirror” instead of “rear-view mirror”. Re-using loan words should rather be seen as a sign of creativity and imagination in the culture. English especially is just as eclectic in its absorption of other languages’ vocabulary. We need to remember that speakers of languages with fewer native speakers are also equally self-confident in their sense of worth as us. Indeed, as members of societies which are rapidly becoming multi-cultural we should show respect for other cultures within our

own societies, whether it be ethnic, religious or linguistic groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a language socialization perspective can help us both to understand the process of language learning which all members of society undergo, and also to appreciate some of the processes at work in second language learning, both our own and our students'. It is to be hoped that by mature reflection on their behavior native speaker teachers may learn some humility and sensitivity to the needs of their students, and that these thoughts we may find their expression in language teaching that the students will experience as both effective and enlightening.

Notes

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