

Words, Worlds, and the Self

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate relationship between language, identity, and cultural exchange. Drawing on personal experiences and theoretical frameworks, it examines how language acquisition and use can shape individuals and collective identities. By analyzing the impact of globalization and migration on cultural diversity, the paper highlights the challenges and opportunities presented by intercultural communication. Ultimately it argues that language is not merely a tool for communication but a powerful force that shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world.

Keywords: Language, Identity, Cultural Exchange.

1. Introduction

Language, a powerful tool that shapes our identities, has been a constant companion throughout my life. I recall a vivid childhood memory of my grandmother, her voice a soothing melody as she narrated tales of our ancestors. These stories woven with intricate details and rich language, ignited my imagination and sparked a lifelong love for words. Through language, I connected with my heritage, understood my culture, and ultimately discovered myself.

The adage that language begins in the womb rings true to me. My earliest memory is my forceful entry into the world, a loud, assertive cry that announced my presence. It was primal language, a declaration of existence, a promise of life to come. This linguistic journey, shaped by family and personal experience, has been a constant companion in shaping my identity and worldview.

2. My Linguistic Journey

As the youngest of six, I entered the world just as my older siblings were finishing primary school. I was home-schooled by my teacher-parents which meant a unique linguistic journey. My mother tongue, Samoan, has two distinct forms: the everyday language and the formal oratory style. Simultaneously, I was introduced to English primarily through my father, who had studied in New Zealand. I absorbed simple words like yes, no, please, and thank you, by listening to family conversations. My sisters, who were avid readers, further exposed me to the written word, igniting a love for language that continues to shape my life.

My English vocabulary expanded significantly during primary school, evolving from basic words to a deeper understanding of meaning. English became the medium of instruction and I was also taught the Samoan language as a

subject. While Samoan remains our primary language at home, my English skills continue to grow alongside it.

I attended one of the country's top-ranked colleges, where academically gifted students from privileged backgrounds surrounded me. While I have not been a natural prodigy, I possess my mother's unwavering determination and commitment to succeed. The marks left by my mother's discipline reflect the values she instilled in me. Her determination and strength helped me overcome life's challenges and achieve my goals.

The college environment was English-dominant, both in and out of the classroom. This linguistic immersion coupled with dedicated study propelled my English skills to the forefront. Despite excelling in speaking English, I struggled with written expression particularly constructing coherent arguments. My linguistic journey at this prestigious institution significantly shaped my academic and personal development.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted into our university. However, due to my limited proficiency in Samoan during high school, I couldn't pursue advanced language studies. While I can communicate in Samoan, a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge remains unexplored.

Given my strong performance in English, I chose to major in this subject. This decision led me to discover the captivating world of William Shakespeare. His timeless tragedies, though written in the archaic language of the Elizabethan era, offered profound insights into human nature and the complexities of life. Despite the initial challenges posed by the language barrier, I found myself drawn to his powerful storytelling and the richness of his characters.

The influence of English continued to shape my language use after I began working as an English teacher. Daily interactions with students necessitated using English, reinforcing its presence in my life. Despite this, I never felt that I was losing my native language. Instead, I felt that I was maintaining both languages.

3. Language as a Tool of Power and Authority

Bourdieu (1977) eloquently states that language is not merely a tool of communication or knowledge dissemination; it is also a potent instrument of power. It weaves intricate networks of conscious and unconscious alliances, shaping our social interactions and identities.

When we speak, we expect to be understood, believed, respected, and valued. This mutual respect between speaker and

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listener is crucial. As a teacher, I believe that my learners are worthy of my knowledge and guidance, and they, in turn, are worthy of acquiring it. This reciprocal respect forms the foundation of effective learning and teaching.

Language is not only about communication; it is also a powerful instrument that reinforces social hierarchies and structures. Language of authority, such as the language used by religious leaders or politicians, plays a crucial role in shaping beliefs and behaviours. However, this authority is contingent upon social conditions that support legitimacy. When these conditions erode, the power of language diminishes. (Bourdieu 1977)

For effective communication, the speaker must be well prepared and consider their audience. The message should be clear, concise, and relevant to the listener's interests and needs. The speaker must also be mindful of the context and choose their words carefully. Ultimately the success of communication depends on the speaker's ability to connect with their audience on an emotional and intellectual level.

4. Language Stance and Understanding

In the context of my language journey, I believe that my role as a speaker and teacher is to empower students with the tools of language. By sharing knowledge and encouraging critical thinking, I hope to foster a generation of informed and articulate individuals.

Walker (2009) highlights in his documentary the global demand for English. This isn't merely due to native speaker's influence but rather a global shift towards English as a language of opportunity. Watching this documentary shifted my perspective on language loss. I realised that gaining English proficiency could inadvertently distance me from my Samoan roots.

Bourdieu's (1977) categorization of language into high, middle, and low classes sheds light on language's role in societal power structures. The language of the elite, often associated with government officials and celebrities, shapes societal norms and values. This dominant language reinforces existing power dynamics and can marginalize less prestigious languages.

By understanding the power of language, we can appreciate its impact on our identities, relationships, and social standing. As language learners, we have the opportunity to bridge cultural divides and foster global understanding.

5. Language and Identity

I believe that our language choices significantly impact our identity. In developing countries, acquiring English can sometimes lead to feelings of superiority. This can be problematic as it can foster a sense of cultural superiority and a tendency to look down on others. It's important to remember that acquiring multiple languages can have both positive and negative consequences depending on the intentions behind it.

Language is a powerful tool for self-expression and social interaction. When we speak, we reveal aspects of our identity, including our cultural background, socioeconomic status, and

educational level. Language can be a source of pride and belonging but also a source of division and discrimination.

My language journey has shaped my identity as a Samoan. The languages I have acquired influenced my worldview, my relationships, and my sense of self. Language is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that continues to fascinate and intrigue me.

6. Identity and Self-Definition

I recall my father's words, that every person is a complex being with a unique combination of attributes. This resonates deeply with me. It reminds me that each individual is unique with their strengths, weaknesses, and experiences. Trying to define oneself is a complex task, as it involves exploring one's identity on multiple levels.

My identity is a multifaceted tapestry woven from various threads including my Samoan heritage, my personal experiences, and aspirations. I am a Samoan woman, a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a student. These roles shape who I am and how I interact with the world.

My ancestors hail from the Southeast of Asia and my ethnic group, the Polynesians are known for their resilience and determination. These qualities have been passed down through generations and have shaped the Samoan people. As I continue to navigate the complexities of life, I am reminded that my identity is constantly evolving. I am a work in progress and my story is still unfolding.

7. Cultural Exchange

I was oblivious to the cultural duality I was experiencing. I never thought I was living in two different cultural worlds. The experience has broadened my perspective, teaching me to appreciate cultural diversity and adapt to different situations. I've realized that I possess two distinct identities, my Samoan heritage which is the foundation of who I am, and my Western identity which allows me to navigate the world. While Western influences are increasingly shaping my individuality, my Samoan identity remains core to my beliefs and values. It empowers me and sets me apart especially when away from home.

As an English teacher, my job requires me to use my Western identity to help students understand the complexities of the English language. However, I often draw on my Samoan identity to explain themes in literature connecting them to the Samoan culture and personal experiences. This shift between cultural contexts can be challenging and rewarding.

I was challenged by an article referencing Kachru's (1985) concentric model of English. This model divides English speakers into three circles: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. As an English speaker from the outer circle, I felt a sting when I realized the model implies a hierarchy, suggesting that non-native speakers are somehow inferior to native speakers. While I can't fault the theorist, I view this as a challenge to my role as an ESL teacher.

I believe all my identities are valuable assets in the classroom. They allow me to expose my students to diverse

cultures and foster tolerance.

8. Self-Discovery

According to Atay & Ece (2009) identity in its many forms shapes how humans perceive and respond to the world. This definition resonates with my Samoan identity, upbringing, societal norms, cultural background influence, and my interpretation of the world around me.

I feel a strong connection to the story presented “The Turkish Perspective.” Like Turkey, Western culture has influenced Samoa while maintaining its rich cultural heritage. Despite life changes and directions, my Samoan heritage remains a core part of my identity. This search for identity, explored in Turkish history, mirrors my self-discovery.

Identity is shaped by both individual and social factors. Our sense of self is influenced by our conception and how we are perceived within our social groups and society at large. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, it is formed in a dynamic space between personal and societal influences. This space is characterized by negotiation and translation as we continually adapt and redefine our cultural identity. Mercer (1990) pointed out that our understanding of ourselves is always subject to change and questioning. This uncertainty is a natural part of human experience and it can be both challenging and liberating. He said that identity is a complex and often contradictory experience. It involves grappling with uncertainty and doubt as we navigate our understanding of self within the context of expectations.

Many individuals struggle to reconcile their true selves with the identities they present to the world. Some may hide aspects of their identity that they fear may be judged or misunderstood, while others may selectively reveal certain aspects that they believe will be positively received. The way we present ourselves to the world is often influenced by societal expectations and norms. We may feel pressured to conform to certain stereotypes or ideals which can lead to a disconnection between our authentic selves and our public personas.

9. Conclusion

Norton (2013) from a post-structural perspective suggests that the relationship between language and identity is complex, dynamic, and multifaceted. It evolves across time and space, is co-constructed through social interactions, and is embedded within larger power structures. This relationship can be both empowering and oppressive and classroom practices often shape it.

Reflecting on my personal experiences, I believe that both language and identity are multifaceted as Norton suggests in his research on language as a transformative process. This resonates deeply with me as I experienced how learning English has shaped my identity and opened up opportunities for me.

Identity provides a sense of continuity and sameness allowing us to experience ourselves as consistent beings over time. Identity both differentiates us from others and connects us to shared human experiences. It's a dynamic process that evolves throughout our lives, ultimately shaping our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

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