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**More than Mere Language:
Interaction of Language, Ethnicity, Culture, Thinking, and Identity with
Examples from Language Area in the USA**

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1. Introduction

The topic of this term paper is to analyze the relationship between ethnicity, culture, identity, and even thinking on the one hand and language on the other. This paper will focus on the phenomenal and inevitable connection between language and personal or in-group mentality as matter of discussion. Relevant questions to be disputed include such as ‘Which role does language in general play in maintaining one’s identity? What impact has the native or foreign language got on people? What impact does language have on the process of thinking and on the awareness of culture?’. In order to understand these interactions more thoroughly, the investigation and study of formation of ‘multi-ethnic’ identities or immigrant groups seem considerable means.

Within the scope of the present term paper the current situation and development in terms of linguistic troubles in the United States are particularly studied and explored. Therefore the examples mentioned contribute only to a certain extent to the clarification on processes occurred and occurring in the inter-group relationship. The second and third chapters deal with some linguistic phenomena in correlation with human behavioral schemes by employing a few practical examples, while the fourth chapter more concentrates on certain minorities in the United States to demonstrate differences among them.

2. Language as Human Factor and Common Denominator of Human Relationships

To explore human nature and relationship among human beings without exploring human language is unthinkable. In language “we are offered, by the society we enter, and we offer to others, a very overt symbolization of ourselves and our universe” (Enninger 1991:24). To understand any nation and psychological profiles of individuals scientists and common people have to understand their language and vice versa, to be able to understand their language, psychological profiles have to be understood.

2.1 Language and Ethnicity

Before initiating the discussion on the link between language and ethnicity, the term ‘ethnicity’ requires definition. For ‘establishment-oriented’ defenders of Western capitalist democracy such as Lord Acton or John Stuart Mill “ethnicity was nothing but the disrupter of civility, a base passion, a nightmare, a wild evil”. (Fishman 1989:13) Today “[e]thnicity is rightly understood as an aspect of a collectivity’s self-recognition as well as an aspect of its recognition in the eyes of outsiders” (Fishman 1989:24). People of one ethnicity “share

putative ancestral origins and, therefore, the gifts and responsibilities, rights and obligations deriving therefrom” (Fishman 1989:10). Thus, ‘ethnicity’ does not necessarily amount to ‘race’. However, the fact that not all light-skinned are automatically White Anglo-Saxon Protestants as well as the question of race in case of Hispanics should be taken into consideration.

To define the term ‘ethnic majority’ versus ‘ethnic minority’ is a further evident necessity. “The former term [ethnic majority] normally refers to the ethnic groups that hold social and political power in nations and the latter [ethnic minority] to groups which have very little or none” (Singh 1999:84). According to this definition, the quality of majority vs. minority does not depend on the number of affected people but on their social and political power.¹ (Moreover, we should take into consideration that representatives of one single ethnicity can be present in both groups.)

Political power has historically been concentrated in the hands of America’s white population. This deplorable state of affairs has been responsible for the majority-minority problematic remaining not only unresolved but also disregarded.² Beginning with the abolishment movement in the 19th century and racial quarrels following the Second World War ethnic troubles became more topical, not least because of the participation of concerned groups in the debate about their minority problems. Ever new minority groups join this process:

Immigration and immigrant groups have always been central to political debate in the United States. But now immigrants are themselves participants in that debate. Hispanics and Asians in the United States are now “Hispanic Americans” and “Asian Americans” and have joined blacks and Indians as certified “minorities”. (Lopez 1991:132)

Furthermore, the majority has in a certain way of understanding turned into a minority itself, namely, because of its ‘mainstream’:

Relative to earlier periods and to the concerted Americanization pressures that were formerly applied by both mainstream and sidestream institutions, it is now not only possible to ‘be American’ in a variety of different ethnic ways, but sidestream ethnicity *per se* has also become much more modern and American. ... Americans now expect each other to have some sidestream ethnicity; any sidestream ethnicity will do and all ethnicities are equally good (well, almost all) because their role is no longer to help or hinder ‘being a success in America’ but to provide ‘roots’: meaningful cultural depth to individual and family life. (Fishman 1989:669-79)

¹ Compare also Roman, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Normans in England, British and Spanish colonies.

² The skirmishes nowadays were present not only today. Today they are recognised.

The most obvious distinguishing mark to set one ethnicity against another seems to be the language spoken – be it the most reliable characteristic or not ... Consequently, the term ‘ethnicity’ is often mistaken as a synonym for ‘language ethnicity’: “the ultimate irony of the very notion of ‘language minority’ as applied to the Asian and Hispanics groups in their distinctiveness is primarily racial, not linguistic. ... They have become “language minorities”, ... groups whose distinctiveness from majority America is identified primarily in terms of the different languages they speak” (Lopez 1991:132). Language is an exterior distinguishing mark determined by outsiders, outsiders in terms of community. The insider might make a different choice. The putative ancestral origins are the third issue that theoretically might differ from the two previous (see Fishman’s definition of ethnicity above). But, to some degree, language is also an inner institution responsible for identification with a certain ethnicity: “The old ethnic ties found their linguistic expression in loyalty to a language other than that of the major society. The new ethnic identities rely on linguistic symbols to establish speech conventions that are significantly different” (Gumperz 1982:6). By studying a foreign language, one automatically “approaches” the understanding of ethnicity and its culture and thus “approaches” ethnicity and its culture itself. In a group of foreigners, one will feel more secure, comfortable and relaxed, if he/she masters its language. And this group will be more willing to accept the one who speaks its language or dialect.

2.2 Language and Culture

According to Goetz de Gaona, a self-confident proponent of teaching in Spanish in schools, “Culture is language, and language is culture.” (Schnaiberg) The so-called “rheinische Schule” developed the thesis of “Zusammenfall von Sprachraum und Kulturraum im weitesten Sinne” (Löffler 1990:144).

Having different words in one language for only a single word in another implicates the cognition (and realization) of differing realities. Therefore it is not surprising that the Eskimo language is able to actually name a lot more and differentiated kinds of snow than we do since snow in its varieties has a much greater meaning for them than for us. As Sapir said: “In dem Vokabular einer Sprache spiegelt sich eindeutig die physikalische und soziale Umwelt eines Volkes” (qtd. in Henle 1969:15). Furthermore, language is a religious issue. It is the mother tongue which God and saints use to speak to their people: “the deity (or deities) necessarily speak(s) to each ethnicity in its own language and could not conceivably do otherwise” (Fishman 1989:11).³

³ Thus, the Koran might be translated into other languages but then it is not the Holy Koran any more. Moslems, regardless of their nationality and mother tongue, ought to read the Koran in the original Arabic version.

Prohibiting Native Americans and Indians to speak their native languages for Indians and Hispanics has also had the ambitious aim to integrate them into the culture of the majority and thereby undermine their cultures regarded as foreign - a procedure transacted not only unconsciously but also in full consciousness.

2.3 Language, Thinking, and the Way of Thinking

The process of thinking takes a certain knowledge of words and of the way to employ this vocabulary within its specific language system for granted. “Gewöhnlich gilt Sprache als der wichtigste Beweis für die Existenz und den Charakter des Denkens” (Henle 1969:11). Language determines the direction of thinking as well as its logic: “Bestimmte Unterschiede des Denkens stehen zu solchen der Sprache in Beziehung” (Henle 1969:12). If one’s vocabulary is not sufficient to express a certain matter, he/she will not be able to fully understand it. If one is not able to understand a certain matter, his/her environment appears him/her different. It follows that “[d]ie Welt einer Person, die ein bestimmtes Vokabular benutzt, anders [erscheint], als sie einer Person erscheinen würde, die ein anderes benutzt” (Henle 1969:17).

Comparing SAE-Languages [Standard Average European Languages, like English, German or French] and Navaho sets an example for this ambivalence: “Das Satzmuster Handelnder-und-Handlung, welches den SAE-Sprachen so vertraut ist, ist der Navaho-Sprache fremd. Eine Person wird mit einer Handlung mehr assoziiert, als dass sie deren Urheber oder Ursache wäre” (Henle 1969:38).

To round off the picture, it should be mentioned that - strictly speaking - everybody speaks an idiolect rather than a language: This explains why the ‘worlds’ of people - though speaking the same language - might differ.⁴

2.4 Language and Identity

As mentioned in the foregoing chapter, people speak in idiolect, i.e. every individual in its own language. One constitutes his/her language, but also depends on it: “‘Language arises from man’s need to express himself, to objectify himself.’ (Bakhtin) ... The language that a person speaks is the language that person identifies with.” (Lanehart 1996:322)

The key to change or maintenance of a person’s identity is hidden in language: “To try to dictate and purge a person’s language is to try to change the individual, to alter that person’s identity. ... To change a person’s language is to change the person” (Lanehart 1996:322-8). Lesley Milroy affirms: “any attempt to eliminate or stigmatize a nonstandard

⁴ By the way, as a rule, we judge about a person’s intelligence and wisdom by his/her rhetorical skills.

variety will not work, and will be seen as a direct attack on the values and social identity of the speaker” (qtd. in Lanehart 1996:322). History provides uncountable samples for the disappearance of standard languages and nonstandard varieties all around the world, even without the influence of a hostile language policy. In principle, the situation at present is not very much changed. The ways of eliminating and altering might now be more undercover and ‘soft’. But of course this process is linked with a process of change and development of values and of the social identities of speakers.

3. Language as a weapon: From Independence Movements to Linguistic Nationalism

From the previous chapters it emerges the language is close-knit with ethnicity and its attitudes. Language can be used to strengthen these attitudes and therewith ethnicity’s self-consciousness on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to distinguish oneself from other groups. Language is a weapon, either defensive or offensive:

Nationalism—which has consistently made language its banner—is an ideology designed to unify a group, to protect or promote its interests by organizing that principle around a more inclusive ethnocultural identity leading to mobilization of the group as a political force. Where nation building is not a goal, linguistic nationalism may arise to establish balance among diverse ethnocultural groups; to promote socioeconomic goals and advancements; to redress the present a rational continuation of the past in order to overcome the kind of alienation and fragmentation rooted in the loss of ethnocultural continuity, which afflicts indigenous populations in a modernized world and many immigrants as they face reethnicization. (Solé 1995:112)

To transfer this issue on American ground, we should first look at American settlers struggling against British colonial power. After having won the Independence War, the fight for independence continued on the linguistic level. Among American settlers English was a major language, though not the only one. It was German, for example, which as a language of documentation (in the American constitution there is no law concerning language status) was also taken into consideration to become the language of the North American continent.

When the US became independent, there was a lively discussion about whether English was to be the language of the new nation, what it should be called (American? Columbian? Fredonian?) and whether it should not be clearly distinguished from the English of the former colonial power. (Görlach 1997:15)

In the end, however, English succeeded in becoming the major language of the new nation, but not just in its British variety. Beginning with the foundation of a language academy in the late 18th century and the following discussions on how “to distance AmE from BrE and to give it additional respectability” (Görlach 1997:14) American English has drifted off of its British counterpart.⁵ Today, dictionaries in both varieties of English exist; learning English we have to clarify on the variety of English to be learned. After the Second World War the impact of American English on European languages and also on British English has even increased.

After the successful establishment of political and linguistic independence, American English itself has become a tool of suppression. In the 1960s, “[t]he officialization of English in most states [of the United States of America] led to actual or potential institutional suppression of foreign languages in all official spheres and grounds” (Solé 1995:114). As a result—and as such not only in the USA—“the impact of English on vital and fully functional languages is often seen as a threat and provokes disproportionate reactions” (Görlach 1997:29):

From the sixties through the mid seventies, and again in the late eighties, we witnessed a widespread revival of ethnicity and language nationalism wherever ethnolinguistic minorities had been suppressed. The ethnicity boom brought the language issue to the foreground. In spite of seeming de-ethnicization in most modern settings, mother-tongue language loyalty emerged as a constant. (Solé 1995: 111)

This process is still continuing. The consciousness for one’s mother tongue (and thereby a consciousness for one’s own ancestry and unique culture) in the United States and worldwide as well as the readiness to fight for one’s native language have risen.

4. Language Contentions in the United States

The formation of the United States of America as a geographical and political unit was a history of colonization, westward movement, wars, local battles, and compromises. As a result, a heterogeneous cultural landscape has been constituted and at the same time the endeavor to unification and ‘anglicization’ was in place. These processes are still going on. The success of this or another force is strongly depending on the concerned group, i.e. on the number of its members, its language proficiency, the historical background, its willingness to proceed the achievements, its political position and economic importance.

⁵ Today, besides British and American English, there are also New Zealand, Canadian, Irish, Caribbean, Jamaican, South African English.

4.1 English as a Necessity

English—or more precisely American English—was and still is the language of a majority in the United States. This fact as well as the awareness of English being the international language of commerce, science and politics underline the necessity of mastering English as “lingua franca” (Fishman 1989:403). English “symbolizes power, upward mobility, even in-group identity. Furthermore, it is the dominant language of the school, the workplace, and other institutional milieus” (Galindo 1993:204). “English was considered to be important for practical reasons” (Ryan 1977:64-5). Furthermore, a certain minority group trying to draw attention to own problems and to take an active part in American institutions, also such concerning the maintenance of its native language, has first of all to learn English in order to be able to express itself.

4.2 Hispanics

The United Commission on Civil Rights founded in 1972 obliged schools the learning of English and even forbade the usage of Spanish in the United States:

- (1) English is the standard language in the United States and all citizens must learn it;
- (2) the pupil’s best interests are served if he speaks English well. English enhances his opportunities for education and employment while Spanish is a handicap;
- (3) proper English enables Mexican Americans to compete with Anglos;
- (4) teachers and pupils do not speak Spanish; it is impolite to speak a language not understood by all. (Ryan 1977:62-3)

Even if the intention of the United Commission was to promote the economic advancement of America’s Spanish-speaking population it has become evident that this concept of force failed. Furthermore, it triggered off resentments among some Hispanics, and paradoxically enough, e.g., WASP policemen and social workers occupied in the South and West coastal areas of the United States are required to possess basic knowledge of Spanish. For instance, in El Paso “almost all types of services and forms of interaction may indeed be conducted in Spanish” (Hidalgo 1995:35).

But a special feature should be added. Spanish, unlike other languages of minorities, enjoys a particularly advanced niche. Firstly, the Spanish-speaking population in the southern states was there prior to the English-speaking settlers, and “Spanish language in the United States has been in existence since the arrival of Mexican settlers throughout the Southwest. For many years it served as a language of prestige and power in various domains” (Galindo

1993:205). Secondly, “[t]he constant influx of immigrants from south of the border keeps Spanish alive for part of the population” (Galindo 1993:199). Thirdly, “[t]he Spanish language group in the United States is the largest non-English-speaking minority, continually replenished by the arrival of new immigrants into preestablished communities, or regions characterized by high density of that subpopulation” (Solé 1995:113). Finally, Spanish is a language widely spread all over the world. Thus the economic purpose of the world market makes it relevant to study even for non-Iberian-people.

At present, due to “intergenerational transmission of the ancestral language, the Anglo/Mexican population ratio, movement for self-determination, and upward mobility of the Mexican-Americans” the conditions of bilingualism, language shift or even reverse language shift, diglossia, and building and legalizing such varieties like Chicano English, *caló* or *tirilongo* (Galindo 1993:206-11) have been established in southwest cities close to the Mexican border, e.g. El Paso, Tuscon, San Diego. (Hidalgo 1995:37-39) Withal one matter of fact is striking: “Mexican American college students felt a high level of language loyalty toward Spanish and ... relegated both varieties (Spanish and English) to specific areas of appropriateness and contextualization” (Galindo 1993:206-7). On the whole, the educated classes are more interested and involved in maintaining their heritage. On the contrary, the working class is first of all interested in gaining economic wealth as fast as possible, and therefore drive their children into speaking English, and in some cases refuse to speak their mother tongue even at home, if their proficiency in English is sufficient to communicate. (Fishman 1989:492-5) They might have their native culture, ethnicity, identity, but they do not rack their brains with this topic.⁶

4.3 African Americans

The original social and language situation of African Americans has been essentially different from that of Hispanics. Their forefathers were brought by force from all over the African continent to both Americas as slaves. Their origins and therefore their languages were often as different as the African continent itself; their opportunity to communicate with each other was limited by the farm borders. Consequently, there was no single common ‘African’ or ‘Black’ language, but rather a whole range of languages or dialects. Due to this fact, African American were told to “accommodate another’ sociocultural and historical context” and language. (Lanehard 1996:329) Nevertheless within their respective local communities, they prevailed their culture, e.g. in songs, dance and music, and in language, too.

⁶ Compare also the national movements for independence in South-East Europe in the 19th as well as in Africa and India in the 20th century.

With the abolition of slavery and even more evidently during and after the Civil Rights Movement which resulted in the termination of segregation as well as by way of the so-called 'Black is Beautiful' Movement the situation has changed considerably. The language of America's Black population has not yet been standardized—we are using the term 'Ebonics' or 'African American Vernacular English'—although an increasing interest and attempts to record this variety and to finally write it down give evidence to the existence of African American cultural unity. But this coincidence is not absolutely convenient for all:

The 'real trouble' with Ebonics is that to recognise it (even as a temporary stepping stone to acquisition of the majority tongue) is to also acknowledge that 'there is a distinct, healthy, functioning African-American culture which is not white, and which does not want to be white'. This is an uncomfortable idea in a country which promotes the notion of 'one nation, indivisible'. (Singh 1999:93)

This attitude reminds of the formerly made shift in America's understanding of itself from the 'melting pot' to the 'salad bowl'.

4.4 Further Ethnic and Language Minorities in the USA

The fate of other ethnicities and of their struggle to maintain their respective native languages is less evident because of a still relatively small number of speakers. In the past, Native Americans were systematically pushed westwards or even just eradicated, their culture was destroyed, and their language forbidden. Many parents do not even want their children to learn their native language because of dramatic experiences and bad experiences in the past. (Batchelder) But films such as "Dances with Wolves" (by and with Kevin Costner) and scientific research contribute to the revival of Native American languages and cultures. Other ethnicities still exercise their culture and language thanks to their religious rules and regulations (like Pennsylvania Germans or Acadians). Characteristically for such groups that they are proficient in both languages, apply diglossia, and are very familiar with common laws. In this way they avoid conflicts with the majority. Still others are immigrants or their descendants (e.g. Chinese, Jews, Vietnams, Italians). They live in diasporas, establish little ethnical districts and as a rule do not cut bounds with their homeland.

5. Conclusion

The author of this written material is far away from claiming any prevailing conclusion. For anyone to be able to draw universal conclusions, the political and linguistic situation of minority groups in other countries—also in the respective historical context—has to be surveyed. And even this investigation carried out, it will still contribute only a part to the whole mosaic of problems and troubles in terms of relationship between ethnicity, culture, identity, and language, not to mention to provide an unequivocal solution. Psychologists, ethnologists, social workers and other specialists have to contribute their part; a lot of empirical research has to be done to provide a clearer picture to the whole subject in its complex nature. The link between language and ethnicity is a phenomenon which still has to be explored. One of the main obstacles is the aforementioned complexity of the subject and the consequential difficulty to keep track of all aspects of the subject under discussion.

The foregoing chapters presented this complexity and a lot at first view seemingly paradoxical consequences. The main intention pursued with this paper is to induce scientists to take a closer look at the topic, politicians to deal more cautiously with their language policy, common people to tolerate the existence of different languages, even in one country, and to awake interests in the own as well as foreign languages.

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