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Sociolinguistics
August 3, 2015

Authority of Language

The language we speak is typically given power through the speaker in his voice, and the power is reciprocated by the listener. We judge what is spoken as listeners, based on what they say and how they say it. In this sense, we give authority to the speaker, however we also take the authority from the speaker. We are affected directly and indirectly by this constant change of balance, while other systems implement their own authority. This balance can create a language, change a language, empower the speaker, and demean the speaker.

When looking at communication as a whole, we often think of ourselves as speakers. However, we often forget that we are also listeners, and with that we give and take power. In that sense, communication is a two way street, putting the power of interpretation in the hands of more than just the speaker. In fact, it is not between a speaker and a listener, but between multiple speakers and listeners. This interchanges between people, based on their reactions and interaction within the conversation. Some will fall farther into the category of speaker than others, and vice versa, dependent upon the topic and their choice of reactions.

When we listen to a speaker, we give power to a speaker. We give them the time and the room to speak, not just because they are there, but because there is an authority. But, when we stop giving them our full attention and listening to what they say, we take that authority and power away from them. When we belittle their words or take away some meaning that was not the intention of the speaker, we take away the authority of the speaker and assert the authority of the listener. This is a necessity though, as listeners cannot automatically know the intention of the speaker, thus cannot assert exactly what the speaker means without some change in perception, based on their own experiences and understanding.

When this comes to dialect and cultural norms, this can differ as well. A given person speaking with a person who speaks an entirely different dialect will give different meaning and power to the same words. This is the imbalance of power between listeners and speakers. This is the point at which misunderstandings come into play and the authority of who said what becomes murky. In fact, it creates an interchangeable conversation, based on who is in the conversation.

This authority of language can have a rippling effect on an entire language, based on who has the majority power over speakers and listeners. The concept of power can change, when the listener is given certain powers over said listener. We have learned about a few dialects and languages that have been overpowered and driven towards extinction because of this power. Examples of this are the Ainu language, Hawaiian language, and Hawaiian Creole, also known to the locals as Pidgin.

With so few speakers that there are little to no resources for learning, the Ainu language is in danger of extinction. Its last few speakers are dying out, leaving behind a culture to be celebrated without its language. Ainu were pressured as officials and educational systems pushed for students to use standard Japanese. Children from Ainu families were discouraged from using their language.

A large part of their language's decline has been a result of the belief in homogeneity and that the Ainu are an *inferior* ethnic minority, seeing the Ainu language itself as inferior. In 1986, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made comments invoking Japanese homogeneity, which implied that minorities in the United States were bringing down the educational system (Maher, pg 325). The U.S. responded with outrage, especially among its minority groups, who were insulted by the implication that ethnic minorities in the United States had either a low intelligence level or a low literacy level – though it was not fully explained as to which he was implying. He followed this up with an apology that placated minorities in the U.S., but left a bitter taste in the mouths of ethnic minorities in Japan. With a struggle that had lasted from the late 18th century, the Ainu felt this was uncouth to speak of this long struggle to keep their own culture and language alive in the face of assimilation (Maher 328).

Today, there are many Ainu ethnic minorities trying to protect their culture, but the language is more difficult to protect. Though, they are reaching out to more popular outlets to promote their culture, the Ainu are promoting the learning of the language to Ainu and Japanese descendants. The hope is for the Ainu language to be identified and seen as a language of Japan, as it once was, rather than a strange occurrence to be disregarded like a dialect.

For Hawaiians, the standard of English was an alteration from the way their ancestors lived. When their island was made into United States territory, the majority culture from mainland U.S. had decidedly changed what would be the standard. Like the implication of standard Japanese for the Ainu, the result was pressure from government officials, schools and other groups and corporations. The power became stilted, with government officials and schools requiring English as the standard. With this power, much of what Hawaiians did forbade their language in the world, in the classrooms, even if their only language at home was Hawaiian.

The education was so harsh on non-English speakers, that speaking another language in the classroom resulted in harsh physical punishment. Some reported that teachers would slap children on the mouth for speaking Hawaiian. Teachers were warned about this, not to stop, but that if they permitted Hawaiian in their classrooms, their employment would be terminated (Moon, 2014). There were households in which the adults only spoke Hawaiian, but their children were being put through this forceful English training not to use any Hawaiian.

Since then, foundations have been founded and changes have been made, giving families and their children opportunities to be immersed in the Hawaiian language. The ban had been removed in 1986, allowing children to once again use Hawaiian as part of their education (The Hawaiian Language Shall Live). This was following the lowest point for the language, at which children who fluently spoke Hawaiian numbered under fifty. Out of this was born various organizations and groups that promote children and adults learning the native language, to keep it alive. Today, approximately 26,000 people speak Hawaiian fluently.

As one of the many states of the U.S. did over the past, Hawaii took in many immigrants. As a beautiful set of islands with promises for work, its immigrants came from various countries with various different languages. Many of them could not even speak with each other, as they had no connection in Hawaiian or English languages.

The result was a comingling mix of languages, taking English, Hawaiian, Japanese and a few other languages and putting them together in what sounds to native English speakers as a dialect. In fact it sounds so similar to a dialect that it sounds like childish gibberish to English speakers, making it seem to them as an inferior way of speaking English. And the power has been handed, once again, to native English speakers.

This mixed language, called by the speakers as Pidgin, is a phenomenon not commonly seen. As a Creole language, it has various counterparts on mainland United States – mainly the more popular Southern French Creole – which have more or less died out over the past decades. Pidgin in Hawaii has a past similar to Hawaiian, yet different. It originated not from the natives but from the immigrants, but today is seen by the speakers as a language of the natives. For that reason, after decades of facing the criticisms and issues similar to the Hawaiian language, Pidgin finally took its place as an actual language.

Dissimilar to Hawaiian though, it was seen as an inferior dialect, not a language. For this reason, it was beaten out in favor of standardized English. Even today, English speakers mock the language as sounding like a poorly spoken form of English, keeping up an old view of the language. It has, however, taken great steps towards becoming its own language, for the natives to understand each other and to connect to their ancestral roots as immigrants. Today, Pidgin has been implemented into books and is even studied at college institutions in Hawaii.

These three are examples of language being removed of their power as language. This authority was in some way given to the majority, who decided that the standardized form of a different language was more important than culture. It beat out the choice of language, implementing another language as part of the educational system.

These are examples of those who do not speak these languages, as listeners, taking power from the speakers of this language. In the conversations about these language, it is a voice for the language versus a voice for the majority. The majority wins out, by simply taking over the authority, both as listeners and speakers.

This still works on a lower level with dialects as well. In Japan, the concept of standardized Japanese comes out of the Tokyo dialect, making it a presumed “non-dialect” by many Japanese. Other dialects are also seen with various opinions. Just as Tokyo dialect is seen as being a non-dialect, just a standardized Japanese. Okinawa is seen as a very foreign sounding dialect, almost a language all its own. Some might even say that it is a completely separate language from Japanese. Osaka dialect is not uncommon, though has a mix response from being interesting to being scary. Though Hiroshima dialect seems to take a stronger stance with being a more Yakuza-like and masculine dialect, similar to Okayama dialect, hint that Okayama dialect is also very masculine. These responses were taken from 24 individual students and staff at Okayama University.

The responses show opinions of language that become part of the norm in some way shape or form. By this reflection, a dialect such as Okayama dialect makes some students ashamed. Based on follow up interviews, these students explain that they would prefer to speak Tokyo dialect, as when speaking in a formal setting, they feel ashamed to speak Kansai or Okayama dialects. However, students who were familiar with Osaka dialect are open about the dialect they speak, as people see it as interesting.

The power of authority is strong, even if it may seem as a small opinion. When it is held by many, or by the majority, it creates certain strongholds over dialects and languages.

In Japan, that puts Ainu language low on priority. And dialects held in areas that are not Tokyo become less important to the general population.

References

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