

Language Maintenance in Children

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The purpose of this paper aims to explore the different areas of language maintenance and the pressures for a child to abandon their native tongue and adopt the dominant language. The first area that will be investigated is the attitude of the individual. Secondly, the attitude of the parents will be examined. Lastly, the educational system and the influences it has on the maintenance of language will be explored. This paper hopes to develop a deeper understanding in language development and the way it is acquired and maintained in children.

¹I am ashamed of my illiteracy of the English language. I used to say I came to the United States for my children's better education and their bright future. But frankly speaking, I have not spent enough time with them. I spend more time working. I thought it was the best way for them. I mean, I thought financial support was a more important factor than anything else. I have a sixteen-year-old boy and a twelve-year-old girl. I came to

the United States in 1977, when my son was two years old. After my son entered junior high school, I realized we had some gap between us. The gap was getting wider and wider because of a lack of communication. I should have learned the English language or I should have taught Korean to my children, but I did not do either. Now, I wonder why I came to the United States; for my children or for myself?" (Quoted in Jo, 1999:49)

Jennifer Banh has recently graduated from California State University, Los Angeles with her degree in Child and Family Studies and a minor in Sociology. Her interest involves studying the effects acculturation and assimilation in minority immigrants. The article submitted served as her writing sample for graduate school. Jennifer plans to pursue her Masters in Social Work and then go on to a Doctoral program in Sociology.

Every year, thousands of immigrants like this mother come to the United States in hopes of providing better opportunities for their children and a chance to reach the American dream. And every year, thousands of immigrants like this mother struggle with a growing language gap between parents and their children. It is an undoubted fact that the United States is one of the largest melting pots of immigrants. The ethnic diversity is the central characteristic of the United States and is the very aspect that makes it

such a unique country, yet there are undeniable social pressures to assimilate to the mainstream culture of America. The main basis behind assimilation is for minority groups to progressively take on the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture. This is especially true in the case of language. Contrary to a popular assumption that immigrants do not want to learn English, immigrants themselves understand very well that learning English is not a luxury but a necessity (Shin 2005). It has been ingrained in the minds of first and second generation Americans that in order to have an equal opportunity to become successful, being fluent in English is a requirement. The ability to speak and understand English would enable one to seek out opportunities that are not given to non-English speakers. Inevitably, the pressure to assimilate from one native language to English is relatively high.

The execution of this paper aims to explore the realms of language maintenance and the pressures for a child to abandon their native tongue and adopt the dominant language. The first realm that will be explored is the attitude of the individual. The child's motivation to acquire English as their second language will be investigated. I also look at the consequences of losing one's native language and its negative effects on relationships and identity. The second realm that will be inspected is the attitude of the parents. I investigated how important parents believe it is for their child to acquire English and the amount of pressure they put on their child. The third realm that will be explored is the educational system and the influences it has on the development and maintenance of language in children. The educational

institution has more influence on language than any other institution; therefore, I examined the roles and pressures disposed in schooling.

The development of language in children is one of the most amazing feats known to humankind. For that reason it is important to recognize these developments in children and the reasons that influence the maintenance of their native language. In hopes of developing a deeper understanding behind language development, I will investigate the areas concerning the child's attitude, the parent's attitude, and the child's schooling.

CHILD'S ATTITUDE

The child's attitude and views towards acquiring and maintaining English plays a crucial role in the child's decision to acculturate to the larger society. It is clear that English dominates the United States government, education, popular culture, and industry, and has slowly formed itself to be the single most important component in the creation of national identity (Zolberg and Long 1999). Thus, the pressures of society for an immigrant to assimilate are relatively high. It can be seen that language shifts frequently occur where children come in contact with a language that offers greater practical and economical rewards (Shin 2005). This may explain why children develop ambivalent feelings towards their native language. While their mother tongue is an entity that connects them to their culture and is a source for identifying themselves to their ethnicity, the dominant English language creates a struggle to maintain both languages. In many cases, the end result is a complete

loss of their mother tongue.

The general attitude of the Anglo-American majority has been that members of linguistic minorities should integrate themselves into the English-speaking society as soon as possible. Although the official policy towards linguistic minorities has been neither one of encouragement, nor one of repression, it has been more of a policy of toleration (Grosjean 1982). The larger society believes that the maintenance of language and culture should be accepted; however, one should not slow down their acquisition of learning the English language. These pressures from society to assimilate largely influence children's attitudes and views towards their language, including feelings of confusion.

Over the years, there has been increasing pressure in our society directed towards the assimilation of immigrants. These efforts include the desire to make English the only language in governments, hospitals, and schools (Macedo 2000). Children have recognized these growing changes because they realize that if they do not want to be alienated due to their inability to communicate, then learning English would be essential. With English being so dominant, it leaves very little incentive for children to maintain their native language. This concept links the desire of being able to thrive in American with language loss.

Children face many pressures to adopt the dominant language from parents, school, and society. These strains can sometimes lead to unwanted consequences such as becoming monolingual. Recent studies have shown negative effects when linguistic minority

children are forced to learn the majority language, are not encouraged to maintain their native language, and whose social environment does not encourage maintenance (Shin 2005).

The attitudes of minority children are affected by the demands to learn the dominant language. These demands may contribute to a child's feelings of wanting to abandon their first language in order to be included in the larger society. From policies to the media, they all send the message that immigrants need to assimilate into the mainstream culture rapidly. These messages are not bold but rather subtle. Looking at the media, it is clearly dominated by English speaking cartoons and actors. Reading and coloring books are printed in English text. From toy instructions to restaurant menus, it is obvious that the English language dominates. Hence, children feel an enormous obligation to assimilate as an essential need to survive in America because their prior linguistic skills are deemed irrelevant and useless. As a result, many minority children end up losing their mother tongue and become monolingual.

While societal pressures are one hurdle that hinders language maintenance, the child's own ideologies about success is also another impediment. It is embedded in the minds of young children at an early age that language is linked to prestige. Children's attitudes and views of a language are linked to how prestigious they feel that the language is, thereby influencing their development and maintenance of a language. If the people who speak a language have power and prestige, the language they speak will have the benefit of high prestige as well. If the people who speak a language have

little power and low prestige, their language is unlikely to be thought of as prestigious (Gernoble and Whaley 1998). Because the status of a language is so intimately tied to that of its speaker, it is primarily one of the major reasons for a language shift.

It is important to remember that the attitudes and views of language of many young adults and children are on a continuum and differ from person to person. For many people, their attitudes change throughout their lifetime. Tse (2000) supported this idea by addressing the fact that ethnic identity formation is achieved in several stages. It typically starts moving from a period of preference for the dominant culture, to a period of awakening to one's own ethnic minority status. Then to a stage of identity and cultural exploration and ending in a point of ethnic identity conflict resolution and incorporation of ethnic identity into one's overall social identity. These attitudes then shape a person's desire to acquire or discard a language. A child's current stage in identity formation can help predict if a child will maintain their native language. When minority children exhibit a period called ethnic ambivalence or evasion, they begin to relate negative emotions to their heritage and language. Some children feel a need to abandon their minority group and join a more positively-valued dominant group if the members are willing to accept them. Other children show very little interest in their ethnic culture and believe it is more practical and desirable to be accepted by the dominant group (Tse 2000). For that reason, many children abandon their native tongue altogether.

PARENTS' ATTITUDE

They didn't want us to learn Tagalog or a dialect from their island, which is called Ivatan. At first they spoke both dialects at home with my sister and me. But after the incidents of language in school, they made a conscious decision not to mix the languages. So they didn't speak any Tagalog to my sister or me when we were growing up (Quoted in Lee, 1991: 47).

Victor Merina recalled his parents discouraging him and his sister from learning their native tongue because they were being ridiculed for their non-native English. It was previously discussed how children feel an immense amount of pressure to discard their mother tongue in favor of English. Nonetheless these pressures are not only felt by children, but by their parents too.

While it is important to understand the role of the child's attitude in developing and maintaining one's native language, it is equally important to understand the parental attitudes as well. Children are extremely influenced by their parent's attitude towards language use. They are the role models and rule keepers. Parents are the ones who set up the environment for children to learn in. They pick the schools, set up the household context, nurture language, and provide encouragement. In general, parents are the ones who expose children to the second language and the parent's attitudes tend to impact their children's use of language.

In 2003, a research study found that government policies and publication, popular media, and professional texts privilege English over minority languages (Fairclough 2003). These are large influential discourses that cause parents to abandon their native language.

Parents are overwhelmed by negative messages about having home language abilities, and its ability to obstruct American acceptance. This causes some parents to decide against home language maintenance, hence erasing any chance for a child to learn and practice their native language.

Many parents go to great lengths to make sure that their children completely acquire English, so that their children will not be insulted for their imperfect English and to amplify opportunities given to fluent speakers. For example, they may enroll their child in an English only daycare, remove all obvious exposure of the native language (television, books, music), and even censor their playmates. When the parent's attitudes reflect desires to have their child speak English fluently and have native-like proficiency, the general outcome is that their children will almost always completely lose their mother tongue.

Another factor that influences a parent's desire to either discourage or encourage language maintenance is the parents' own views on their culture. If there are a lot of negative societal attitudes directed towards their culture, parents may begin to reject their own culture and adopt a more positively viewed culture. This would make it difficult for a child to maintain their native language. On the other hand, if a parent believes that acquiring both languages is beneficial to the child, they may encourage cultural exploration and associate positive feelings such as pride with their ethnic identity (Mills 2001). The positive outlook of one's own culture will help nurture language development in

children and increase the likelihood of language maintenance.

In a current study, Tse (2000) offers three main primary implications that influence parental attitudes on language. The first reason that parents may prefer English over their native language is the ideology that association with the dominant language affords prestige. Knowledge of the native language may create embarrassment and shame, similar to the feelings that result from association with ethnic group members. Second, imperfect English speakers are judged as less valuable than those with fluency, similarly to those who are closely associated with the ethnic group that suffers lower status. Third, the need to emphasize American identity is reflected in the need to demonstrate English fluency. It should be recognized that not every parent thinks or acts the same. Every parent values different ideologies and believes in different ideas. Ultimately, their attitudes will reflect their desire to foster or abandon their native language in their children.

EDUCATION

While the child's and the parent's attitudes are important influences that shape language maintenance, it is also important to consider the role education plays. Education is handled separately from other institutions because it generally has more impact on the development of English. There are two possible roles of language in education, one is to act as a medium (language is used to teach subjects) or to be taught as a curriculum subject.

When language is used as a medium in education, it is used to teach subjects other than English. For example, math taught through the medium of Chinese and science through the medium of English. Bilingualism is very effective in helping children maintain their native language when their two languages are used effectively as a media. There is substantial evidence that an educational medium is one of the most effective means of promoting language maintenance and bilingualism (Swain and Lapkin 1982). This is because the school will provide a fostering environment that allows children to practice and apply their native language. However, there is also considerable evidence that poor bilingual education is ineffective in language maintenance. In some schools, the structure of bilingual education does not provide substantial amounts of education in the weaker language, or the educator lacks the ability to engage the learner and makes the material comprehensible (Gibbson and Ramirez 2004). This may happen when the teacher mixes the two languages until only one of the languages is needed for the students to comprehend the subject matter. "When this happens and the home language is ignored by the education system, this sends a clear message to the student about the values given to languages other than English in the wider society, and helps to create the attitudes that make situations self perpetuating" (Gibbson and Ramirez 2004). When their home language is brought to school and not recognized and used by the school, it is devalued.

Education also plays a large role in language maintenance when English is taught as a curriculum subject. Language

instruction varies in its effectiveness because of the different resources, social context, and attitudes of students. Moreover, teachers provide different amounts of encouragement and support, and these are priceless factors in enhancing the child's development of English and influencing language maintenance. Having English taught to students does not only provide them access to an English speaking environment, but also provides language learning opportunities. Therefore, it may be difficult for children to maintain their native language when English is so strongly supported by mainstream education.

CONCLUSION

It is not a secret that language is an important part of our lives. Not only is it a form of communication, but it is indirectly a form of identity. Therefore, it is important to study the way in which language is acquired and maintained because it gives us a deeper understanding about how humans function. It is especially important to study the difficulties in maintaining one's native language since there are an estimated 6,000 languages spoken in the world today, only half of which will still be spoken a century from now (Gernoble and Whaley 1998). The process of acquiring and maintaining a language is relevant in understanding human behavior, but also to the psychological reality of immigrants and their families. Children face all sorts of pressures from society to fully assimilate and abandon their native language. Through reviewing current studies, I have hypothesized that there are three major factors that

influences a child in the maintenance of their native language: the child's attitude, the parent's attitude, and the child's education.

There is a lot of pressure from society for immigrants to assimilate and learn English quickly. The English language dominates the media and education system. Children recognize this direction our society is moving towards. Hence, they feel a strong need to integrate themselves into the mainstream society in hopes of preventing feelings of alienation. They recognize the problems associated with the lack of fluency in English, embarrassment, inability to exercise one's right adequately, and being perpetually perceived as a foreigner by Americans (Krashen 1998). Consequently, many children do not feel motivated in maintaining their native language which leads them towards abandoning their mother tongue.

These pressures are not only felt by children, but by their parents as well. Every year thousands of immigrants come to America in hopes of giving their children more opportunities. However, they recognize that these opportunities require the ability to speak English fluently. Feeling a need to integrate themselves into the American society rapidly, they may discourage the use of their native language at home. This makes it difficult for a child to maintain their native language if they are no longer exposed to the language and lack the opportunity to practice it.

While the child's and parent's attitudes are important to recognize in the maintenance of language, another important factor to include is the child's education. The school that a child attends is probably the most powerful socializing

institution in their life. Depending on the type of school the child attends, the school might promote the usage of the child's native language or the school might integrate language minority children into English classes. In most cases the child's English skills will continue to improve and refine, and their native language will decrease from the lack of use, eventually resulting in loss (Shin 2005).

The significance of language maintenance in children has far-reaching effects. It can destroy relationships and build communications barriers. Therefore, it is important to recognize language developments in children and the underlying reasons that influence the preservation of their native language. As a society we should promote language maintenance and encourage cultural and linguistic experiences in the home and at school. Every child deserves the opportunity to express themselves freely in their native language without fear of embarrassment and judgment.

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