

Language Ideology as a Tool and Subject Matter of Enquiry in Sociolinguistic Researches

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Abstract

The use of the concept of ideology in a formal sense is relatively new in sociolinguistics or in even in linguistics in general. The first comprehensive attempt to analyse its utility in this field was done in the 1990s, even though, in an implicit sense, it was being used by sociolinguists even before it was formally introduced as a part of this field. Language ideology is currently viewed both as a field of enquiry, where the researchers aim to unravel the language related ideologies of an individual or a community, and as an influencing factor or a mediating link which affects language behaviours and patterns. Because of the palpable importance, extensive utility and wide applicability, it is adopted by scholars working in various areas of sociolinguistics and it is currently one of the most widely utilised concepts in sociolinguistic researches. In this paper, a brief survey of its use in some select fields of enquiry in sociolinguistics is presented followed by some examples of its use in some specific cases.

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Key words : Linguistic ideology, Language Policy and Planning, Language Politics and Conflicts.

Introduction

“Linguistic ideology”, “language ideology” or “ideology of language” etc. are the various terms that are used to define this relatively new and fast expanding field. As mentioned before, the field developed and consolidated formally in the 90s when there were at least two parallel attempts at about the same time to formalise the use of ideology in linguistics. One of the earliest attempts to do so was through at a daylong symposium devoted to this issue which was held in November 1991 at Chicago at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The theme of the symposium was “Language Ideology: Practice and Theory”. Most of the papers presented in that symposium were later revised, extended and published in a special issue on the same theme in the journal *Pragmatics* (1992) and a reworked and more inclusive version of the journal was later published in the form of a book by the Oxford University Press in 1998 (Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998). At about the same time, Joseph & Taylor (1990) edited a volume entitled *Ideologies of Language*, which brought together a number of writing on ideology from ‘as many different angles and definitions and (and ideologies!) as possible’.

From the beginning attempts to place the language ideology researches within a specific area in linguistics has been far from easy. A section of the practitioners of the concept were inclined to place it under ‘the anthropology of language’ and more generally within the larger scope of the study of communication. The book based on the proceedings of the symposium mentioned above was published in the series of Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics edited by William Bright. In the preface it says, “This book attempts to reposition the anthropology of language in a research agenda addressing the social-historical processes that link face-to-face

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communities to national and transnational spheres.” (Woolard, 1998, p. vi). Since then, the use of the concept and the term has expanded, diversified and is applied to a varied type of researches. The book edited by Joseph and Taylor (1990), for example was published under the rubric of ‘politics of language’. The possibility of its extensive applicability was commented upon by Woolard ‘language ideology is of anthropological importance not simply because of its ethnographic variability but because it is a mediating link between social forms and forms of talk’ (Language Ideology as a field of Inquiry, 1998, p. 3). This indicates the fact that language ideology can be looked into as a possible social variable which influences patterns of linguistic behaviour of an individual or a group. Needless to say, this can be very useful for a vast array of language researchers including sociologists of language, those interested in language policy and planning, in language politics and conflicts, sociolinguistics, gender researchers in cross-cultural studies, researchers on linguistic identity, or on language and.

Before discussing the development of the concept and exploring its significance in Linguistics in general and sociolinguistics in particular, it would be appropriate to dwell on the definition and understanding of the term *language ideology* or for that matter the term *ideology* itself. Ideology in the context of language can be very generally and broadly understood as the ideas and or thoughts related to language. However, like most concepts and terms in social science this term does not give in to easy definition and there is not much consensus on the issue among scholars. Besides, as a comparatively new concept it is open to interpretation. This undefined nature of the concept is seen in the quotation by Joseph and Taylor (1990) mentioned earlier where they said that they were trying to explore the concept not just from “different angles and definitions” but they were also exploring language ideology from “different ideologies” themselves. Kroskrity (2004) notes that “there is no particular unity in this immense body of research, no single core literature, and a range of definitions”. However, this lack of definitional restriction is not necessarily a problem but it may actually be considered as an advantage. It makes the concept more comprehensive, effective and adaptable to the various language problems. As rightly pointed out by Eagleton (1991, cited in Woolard (1998)), ‘ there is little point to attempting to legislate a single interpretation of ideology from the range of useful meaning’.

One of the most accepted and most often cited definition is provided by Silverstein (1979) ‘A set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (1979, p. 193). Alan Rumsey’s (1990) definition which is also widely accepted in the field and which is also partly based on Silverstein is more focussed on group rather than individual ideology, as he suggests that linguistic ideologies are “shared bodies of common sense notions” about the nature of language in the world.

Sociolinguistics, from its earliest days is devoted to exploring how different social categories influence language patterns or linguistic behaviours of its speakers and create language variations along the lines of social categories. However, it is often seen that the same social variable yield contradictory results in language variations in different studies. For example, in many early language variation studies investigating the influence of sex on the use of prestige language varieties (c.f., Trudgill, 1972), it was seen that women show a conscious/unconscious preference for prestige variables. But some later studies (c.f., Bakir, 1986) gave completely opposite results. It shows that instead of taking social variables such as class, sex, level of education etc, as uniform social entities, one can explore the ideological stance of the language group or individuals towards those variables, to find out whether those variables are significant enough in their ideology to create an imprint in their languages. Therefore, instead of focussing on the influence of social categories on language, one may consider exploring the attitude or ideology of the speakers towards those categories.

Even though the formal use of the concept of language ideology is relatively new in Linguistics, the idea is implicitly used by many of the earlier sociolinguistic works. Labov's works especially that in Martha's Vineyard noted that 'feeling about language' (i.e., the unconscious embracing of the 'islander identity') is an important motivator for change (1972) Studies on language attitude also try to explore ideas about language and can be broadly situated under the concept of language ideologies.

Language as an Ideological Concept

To understand the extent to which the concept of ideology can be useful in studies of language, one may look into the process of identifying languages, i.e. how particular languages are delineated, how their areas are outlined and how they are distinguished from other languages. When we examine our understanding of a language and what differentiate it from another language, we see that the concept of languages is in fact ideological and is far from neutral, objective or even structure based as linguistics would like it to be. As we already know that each language consists of a number of varieties – geographical, social and other. Answer to the question of how these varieties are grouped into languages or how lines are drawn to separate two language varieties spoken in adjacent geographical areas; almost always deny any linguistic explanation. The seemingly efficient and apparently neutral criterion of mutual intelligibility for geographical dialects fails on many counts. The criterion of mutual intelligibility requires that if the speeches of the two varieties are intelligible to the speakers of the opposite varieties then they can be grouped as two different varieties of the same language. If not, they belong to two different languages. However neutral as it sounds, the criteria has many obvious loopholes. First of all, the criterion is based primarily on the subjective affirmation about the intelligibility by a portion of the speakers of the varieties in question. This subjectivity of the method itself has some obvious problems. Different speakers of the same speech variety may offer contradictory opinion about the intelligibility of a variety. Besides, there can be the problem of one way intelligibility. For example, it is reported that Polish speakers claim that they do not understand Russian whereas the Russian speakers claim that they understand Polish. This tendency is also the observed in most dominant and non-dominant language varieties. Speakers of dominant varieties, including the standard variety, often claim that the marginal varieties are incomprehensible to them. Whereas speakers of marginal variety tend to claim that they understand the dominant varieties perfectly well. There can also be the cases where variations form a continuum where the adjacent varieties demonstrate a good deal of mutual intelligibility but the distant varieties end up being mutually unintelligible. Besides linguistically such varieties merge into each other without any clear break which makes it difficult to distribute them along with geographical, political or ethnic lines.

In short, the criterion of mutual intelligibility is neither neutral nor very reliable in determining the boundaries of dialects and languages. On the other hand, there are many cases where mutual intelligibility, even when well established, plays little or no role in determining language boundaries. Often the most structurally similar varieties with high degree of mutual intelligibility are considered as different languages – examples, Thai and Lao, Hindi and Urdu. Furthermore, extremely mutually incomprehensible varieties are considered part of the same languages. This can be seen among some varieties of Chinese.

The argument here is that, languages are not really defined by linguistic criteria. The obvious question that arises here that if language boundaries are not defined by linguistics then what is it that marks those boundaries that separate languages? One answer that is seen quite often in the history that a language or language community is that languages or language communities are formed by politics or political events. It is argued that the consolidation of Bengali language community is motivated to a large extent by the 1905 decision by the then British government to

split Bengal into two provinces. (“the British inadvertently politicised Bengali language in 1905 when they split it into two state provinces.” – (Chaklader, 1990). It is also argued that some of the language varieties that are grouped under Hindi are linguistically too diverse to be considered as the same language, if one considers it from a linguistic point of view. In this context, one can recall the comment by Suniti Kumar Chatterji in *Languages and Literatures in modern India* (111)

If in Europe we could conceive Portuguese, Spanish and Catalan ceasing to produce literature... and speakers of all these accepting French as their main literary language, studying only French at school and reading and writing only French, and if on that basis we were to lump together the earlier (and even modern) literatures in all these languages and dialects as ‘French’ literature, then we would be in an analogous situation for ‘Hindi’.

All these points out to the fact that though the linguistic differences are important in understanding what is a language or a language variety, it is the non-linguistic factors associated with those differences, that play a determining role in what constitutes a particular language and what makes it different from another language. Instead of the differences, it is the idea of difference is that the determining factor in constructing language in such cases. How this process of construction, reproduction and maintenance of language takes place is discussed most effectively in the paper *The Boundaries of Language and Discipline: How Ideologies Construct Differences* by Gal and Irvine. In this paper the authors show those ideas about linguistic difference, and not the actual difference itself, that plays a significant role in communities. This is applicable to communities which are large enough to form an entire nation or small to represent an ethnic minority. One can think of a parallel in Anderson’s argument a propos nation as a socially constructed community ‘imagined’ by its people (Anderson, 1983). Gal and Irvine propose that boundaries that mark languages and varieties are socially constructed and linguistic differentiation becomes significant only when such differences become ideological. It is important to note here that the ideologies under discussion are not that of the immediate speakers only, but of all the participants as well as observers in a sociolinguistic field. As example they mention that it is the “observers, namely, the linguists, philologists, ethnographers, missionaries, and other scholars who have historically described and mapped the boundaries of languages and peoples”. They also demonstrate how such observers play effective roles in boundary marking. In one of the examples, they trace the way linguists, missionaries, and other trained observers demarcated languages and peoples in West Africa and South-eastern Europe a century or more ago. Gal and Irvine identifies three semiotic processes through which linguistic ideologies identify differences– namely, iconicity, recursiveness and erasure. Iconicity involves a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic practices, features, or varieties and the social images with which they are linked. The icons are not just features that are indices of social groups. They are more socially relevant than indexes about which the speakers may not be very much aware. “Linguistic practices that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence”

The second criterion of recursiveness is based on how the icons are used to create oppositions between groups. Here the understood linguistic features are projected to another level contrasting it with some other linguistic features that are taken as iconic of some other group. “Thus, the dichotomizing and partitioning process that was involved in some understood opposition (between groups or between linguistic varieties) recurs at other levels, either creating subcategories on each side of a contrast or creating super-categories that include both sides but oppose them to something else”

The final criterion is that of erasure, through which factors which are not in harmony with the ideological scheme gets erased. They either go unnoticed or explained as unimportant/insignificant. “So, for example, a social group, or a language, may be imagined as homogeneous, its internal variation disregarded. Because a linguistic ideology is a totalizing vision, elements that do not fit its interpretive structure- that cannot be seen to fit- must either be ignored or be transformed.” It must be mentioned here that the unfit element does not actually get eradicated but it gets ignored.

Ideology in action: Responses from young Bhojpuri speakers in Kolkata

To see how these semiotic processes work in a modern multilingual scenario, I give here examples taken from a recent sociolinguistic survey¹ on Kolkata residents of different linguistic backgrounds. Here I propose to give a few statements made by native speakers of Bhojpuri, one of the many language varieties grouped under Hindi language. Younger people who said they are Bhojpuri repeatedly tried to establish an association of Bhojpuri with the older age group and thus tried to disassociate from the language.

Excerpt 1: ‘that is used mainly in Bihar or in UP that can be used among ourselves, because it is not necessary that our elders, there are grand fathers grandmothers (dada hai, dadihai, nana hai nani hai), it is not necessary that they must understand Hindi (neeta, f, 22)

Excerpt 2: When someone speaks in Bhojpuri it reminds me of my parents and grandparents, seems like home...Bhojpuri is not really a sweet language, Bengali is sweeter, Bhojpuri (chalta nehi hai) we have communicated with our siblings in hindi English, and with our children also we have communicate in Hindi.(Savita, f, 30).

Excerpt 5... It’s good for communication and it’s [...] ok because I don’t talk in that language so can’t say about (ritu, f,18)

Excerpt 6...We don’t use much (suprabha, f, 28)

Excerpt 7: Hindi is the preferred language at home [...] difficult to understand ... but we can speak (nilesh, m, 18)

Excerpt 8: The way market is going I don’t think I will too proud of my Bhojpuri heritage, now it I if I will feel proud can speak good English (bhushan, m, 20).

ⁱ This project was based on a large scale survey conducted from in Kolkata sponsored by the University Grants Commission through University with Potential of Excellence Scheme.