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Personal, Cultural, and Educational Implications of Language Loss/Transformation: A Canadian Context

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Abstract

In this article, the author provides an engaging account of language loss, transformation, and preservation, and the personal, social, cultural implications of language shift. John's personal reflections on replacing Low German with English as a child, in tandem with a carefully researched account of various language communities in Canada, alerts us to the unique opportunities and challenges teachers face with respect to the multicultural, multi-linguistic character of the contemporary classroom. He punctuates his paper with four thoughtful observations with respect to cultural diversity in schools.

Introduction

Language is our unique relationship with the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values and fundamental notions of what is truth. Our languages are the cornerstone of who we are as a people. Without our languages, our cultures cannot survive (Assembly of First Nations, Education Secretariat, 1990).

One of the primary concerns of ethnocultural communities in North America is maintenance of their cultural identities, a goal that is supported by both Canadian and American government policies. Most experts recognize that language is a vital component of cultural maintenance, and leaders of ethnocultural communities are fearful that many their languages are vanishing. Their concerns are well founded. Ironically, despite a commitment to immigration and multiculturalism, by various levels of government, most North Americans are probably unaware of the degree to which the two countries are linguistically diverse. Most North Americans, including some of the most highly educated and politically influential citizens, are largely ignorant of the sheer diversity, complexity, and cultural richness that these people contribute (Shaw, 2001, p. 7).

Despite protective legislation pertaining to the maintenance of language and culture, researchers estimate that, by the end of the current century, some 5 000 to 7 000 world languages will be lost for various reasons, and the cost will be high —personally, culturally, and nationally. According to international research undertaken by the National Geographic Society, a language disappears every 14 days (Solash, 2010). Factors responsible for this phenomenon vary and may include politics, media, international travel, economics, historical developments, and many others (Chrystal, 1999). In Canada specifically, it is estimated that in the next half century, nearly every Aboriginal language will be lost.

Linguists are often unable to assist with this tragedy because they do not have the where-with-all to recommend appropriate action. Mark Turin, a linguistic anthropologist at Cambridge University, notes that linguists are acquainted with only five to ten percent of the world's languages. Documentation of the unique composition of the other 90 percent constitutes a puzzle of great magnitude and, sadly, to date has not yet been undertaken (Solash, 2010).

Language is also very much a part of individual identity. Individuals generally feel most at ease conversing in their mother tongue. When languages die, cultural identity is radically transformed, and it becomes necessary to adopt a new language. As a result, individuals may personally have to deal with both loss of identity and conceptual familiarity. In addition, members of their immediate family may suffer similar trauma. When experiencing language loss or change, parents lose a valued means by which to socialize their children and thus become incapable of conveying to them their culturally originated values, beliefs, understandings, and wisdom.

To illustrate: one family who had been in North America for a generation realized one day that their four children could not speak or understand their mother tongue, neither would they acknowledge it when their parents addressed them in it (Fillmore, 1991). In such a circumstance, language loss can be traumatic because language is the vehicle by which spiritual, emotional, and cognitive undertones are conveyed (Anderson, 2010; Shaw, 2001). Whenever a language dies, the respective culture loses conceptual knowledge that cannot easily be translated into another language—if at all. The brotherhood of humankind is similarly the poorer when a language dies.

This paper will discuss four aspects of language loss: (a) language transformation or change; (b) personal concerns and community concerns (c) efforts to preserve languages; and, (d) the intricacies of language preservation.

Language Loss May Be Personal

I can personally attest to having changed my primary language, having grown up speaking a Dutch-German dialect known as Low German. I did not learn English until my parents enrolled me in first grade in Trail, British Columbia, where my family had recently relocated. Originally from Saskatchewan, which was experiencing tough economic times, my parents migrated to British Columbia in search of employment. After several years, they experienced sufficient economic success in Trail, so that our family could make an annual trip back to Saskatchewan to visit relatives. I recall one such visit to a family gathering during which I was severely shocked to discover that everyone in the group was speaking Low German. I drew my father aside and demanded to know how this could be. Wasn't

Low German our family's private language? After all, no one we knew in our British Columbia community spoke the language; our neighbors and friends were all English speaking. I thought that having a private family language was a good idea; that way family members could safely share private information in the presence of strangers if they had to. I assumed every family had a private language.

My father smiled at my disarming discovery and gently informed me that our extended family belonged to a group called Mennonites and each of us shared an historical background, culture, and language. I remember my seven-year-old eyes widening at the thought. This was my first truly multicultural experience.

Losing one's language, trying to learn a second language, or having to exchange one's mother tongue for another can be a traumatic experience, particularly for older folk. Many older immigrants who migrate to this continent expect to maintain their culture and language and hope that succeeding generations will carry on their traditions. After all, immigration-oriented countries advertise that newcomers can expect that their cultural traditions and practices will be encouraged. For example, the 1971 Canadian government policy states:

The Government of Canada will support all of Canada's cultures and will seek to assist, resources permitting, the development of those cultural groups which have demonstrated a desire and effort to continue to develop, a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada, as well as a clear need for assistance (Canada, 1971, p. 8545).

Canada specifically has not always been faithful in assisting immigrant groups to maintain their languages, but instead has encouraged incoming groups to acquire at least one of the official languages in order for them to become full participants in Canadian society (Remnant, 1976, p. 12). This apparent form of disconnect sometimes disappoints first generation immigrants, particularly when they witness the highly motivated fashion with which their grandchildren adopt one of Canada's official languages. Elders sometimes perceive the acquisition of a foreign language as the first step in renouncing loyalty to the land of their origin. A practical result of this occurrence is the predictable loss of communication between generations as older folk retain their native language and their

grandchildren learn to speak a resident language (Rong and Preissle, 1998, pp. 41-42). This development is particularly unsettling among cultural groups where it is expected that grandparents will be involved in child raising. In the final analysis, however, it appears that language loyalty persists only as long as economic and social circumstances are conducive to it. If another language — like that of dominant society or the business world proves to have greater value, a shift to that language immediately begins (Edwards, 1993, p. 129).

Fillmore (1991) relates the story of a grandfather who arrived in North America from Korea, only to discover that his grandchildren, who were resident here, could not communicate with him in the Korean language. The children's father ordered them to address their grandfather in Korean, but they were unable to do so. It was only then that the father realized he had neglected his children's linguistic lessons. When the children *did* address their grandfather in a rusty form of Korean, they neglected to use proper forms of the language for addressing elders. The grandfather was shocked at the apparent disrespect the children were displaying towards him. He scolded his son who took it upon himself to punish his children, using a stick as his weapon of reprimand.

Another reality of language loss in the personal realm faces immigrant or resident minority students who hesitate to speak their native languages for fear of embarrassment or because schools encourage limited use of first languages by second language learners. Similarly, some students seeking to master an official language, but have difficulty in doing so, may avoid interacting with their peers who prefer to communicate in their first language, thus creating a wall of another sort (Egbo, 2009, pp. 70-71). Schools are therefore faced with the complex challenge of trying to help second language learners feel welcome while encouraging them to take second language learning seriously. Parents who become aware that their children are experiencing difficulty adjusting to the language scene, often enroll them in private schools. Such a move may reduce stress on the student, but it may also hinder their development in second language learning.

The challenge to retain languages is immense and often becomes quite personal, particularly to individuals who speak more than one language. As Professor Joshua Fishman (1996, p. 81) states: "What are you going to do with your mother tongue before school, out of school,

and after school, because that determines its fate, whether it is going to become self-renewing." The bottom line is that the most reliable way to assure language maintenance is to practice it in the home (Cummins and Swain, 1986; Friesen, 1991).

Community Concerns

Language goes deeper than skin color, or ethnic origin. Skin color is superficial. Language is not. Language calls for a different set of cultural references, a different school system, another literature... Language is more than a passing difference in a democratic and pluralist society.... It might even be the major one (Shaw, 2001, p. 6).

Language is undoubtedly a most effective carrier of cultural content. It is an invisible tie that binds people together. Sociologists call this phenomenon *Gemeinschaft*, meaning fellowship of the deepest order — a strong sense of community. The most important relationship between language and culture gets to the heart of what is lost when a language vanishes. When language use is depleted, specific ways to conceptualize phenomena disappear. As Fishman (1996, p. 72) suggests, take language away from a culture and you take away its greetings, its praises and curses, its laws and literature, its riddles and proverbs, its wisdom and cures, and its prayers. In other words, when you take away these things, you also take away the essence of culture that cannot be expressed in any other way.

Many culturally related interpretations of everyday activities are unique to specific cultural milieu. Individuals' names or the identification of certain institutions may have special meaning within a given cultural context. Some Aboriginal communities recognize ownership of names so that when a child is born and the parents wish to assign a name that is owned by another family, permission to use the name must be attained. Ownership of a name is often bestowed, renewed, or recognized by successive generations at special occasions or recounted in formalized oral traditions (Shaw, 2001, p. 11). When translated into another language, that significance is lost.

A similar phenomenon occurs when new words are introduced into a heritage language. Researchers are quick to point out the difficulty of translating conceptual ideas from one

language to another. Meanings just do not have the same impact when rephrased in another language. For example, Canadian Francophones are proud of their language and envisage its use as a sign of intelligence and sophistication. The French language Academy in Quebec is under constant pressure to purge the linguistic community of any intrusions from English “junk” culture (Elliott and Fleras, 1992, p. 213).

Many incoming immigrant groups have quickly discovered the need to adopt a national language in order to succeed in the job market. Third generation immigrants are usually quite quick to abandon their heritage language, much to the chagrin of their elders. The latter often establish heritage language schools and enroll their grandchildren in them in an effort to preserve some semblance of their old way of life. Usually these efforts do not have meaningful results, much to the disappointment of the older set (Paupanekis and Westfall (2001, p. 101).

Abandoning one’s heritage culture and language often has spiritual and emotional implications, particularly when corresponding institutions in which to practice those are not available. This is particularly true in an Aboriginal context since few forms of religious life imported from Europe even remotely resembled the ceremonial life of North America’s First Peoples. In fact, at first contact their spiritual beliefs and rituals were condemned by incoming Europeans. Native American children who were rounded up and registered in missionary-operated day schools and residential or boarding schools were instructed to abandon the traditional beliefs and practices of their people and adopt European models. Students were punished if they conversed with one another in their native tongue although there were instances where Roman Catholic priests, for example, learned to speak Aboriginal languages even though the underlying reason for their doing so was to convert locals.

Some First Nations, like the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) of Alberta, believe that some forms of uttered language are sacred; that is to say, when certain words or phrases are used in a specific context, a form of spiritual exercise or worship is enacted. In some cultures languages are considered holy in themselves while other cultures hold that forms of their

language contain holy thoughts, holy dictums, or metaphors of holiness (Fishman, 1996, p. 73).

Milton Gordon's (1964, p. 70) classic seven step paradigm of cultural assimilation includes language shifts only by implication, citing changes in cultural practice, adopting dominant group relationships, intermarriage, gaining a sense of peoplehood with the dominant group, absence of discrimination on the part of the group being assimilated, and arriving at the position that the assimilated minority experiences no issues pertaining to their loss of cultural identity. We have learned much since then, and now realize that language is the predominant vehicle by which to preserve cultural identity.

Preserving Languages

A few decades ago when it was discovered that heritage languages were disappearing, a myriad of government and community agencies heeded the call to establish second language programs, even though the evidence was not in to prove that these programs would be effective. In Canada, for example, the province of Alberta began a series of such schools in 1970 with the following enrollment figures: Ukrainian, 1 105, German, 935, Hebrew, 669, and Yiddish, 77. The province of Ontario objected to the idea of offering basic school instruction in other than the two official languages, except on a temporary basis to assist students in acquiring English skills. By 1982, over 80 000 students were enrolled in these programs (Martel, 1984).

Heritage language programs were not initiated without resistance since assimilationists argued that such programs would hinder the integration process. Their position was that, if immigrant children *did* not acquire facility in the country's official language, they would not be able to compete effectively in the job market. If students had a deficiency in an official language, it would be contrary to good pedagogy to provide them with instruction in another language. Adherents to this line of thinking also argued that a child's mind can only absorb so much information; therefore, time spent in other than "essential" instruction would be time lost from learning important material (Ashworth, 1988, p. 187).

In Canada, some school districts mandate heritage language instruction, thus making available the opportunity for all students to learn a second language. In 1971, Alberta became the first province to deliver on this recommendation. Saskatchewan was the second province to do so in 1978, followed by Manitoba in 1978, and Ontario in 1989 – all responding to the federal government’s newly established multicultural policy. Despite these efforts, English continues to be the predominant language of instruction in English-speaking provinces, while French is the principal language of instruction in Quebec. School programs cannot maintain or rejuvenate heritage languages even if they have strong community support. However, such instruction must be made available if only to meet the intent of Canada’s Multicultural Act (Egbo, 2009, p. 70). Government assistance in establishing and maintaining heritage schools is not seen as a significant factor in determining their success. Still, yearnings to retain elements of cultural life from “the old country” remain strong.

Closely aligned with the above is the phenomenon of English as a second language (ESL) programs. ESL has been by far the most common educational response to linguistic diversity. Unfortunately, instead of teaching ESL in ways that encourage the maintenance of students’ first languages, schools respond in ways that de-emphasize primary languages. As Egbo (2009, p. 71) has concluded:

There is an implicit assumption that exclusive focus on the teaching of ESL will facilitate minority students’ successful integration into the education system and mainstream culture.... Schools have to make an ideological shift that will give greater recognition to the advantages of maintaining students’ home languages while learning a second language.

The Indigenous peoples of North America are particularly concerned about cultural and linguistic maintenance, and have a hard job of it in light of the fact that their traditional world-view is so different from that imported from other continents. Many First Peoples still believe humankind should respect nature to the extent that individuals and communities should work in harmony with nature’s rhythms. They further maintain that all entities in the universe are interconnected in some way: this interconnection is implied and

confirmed by the phrase “all my relations,” which is often the ending of a prayer. Nature is not to be exploited, but appreciated and respected in a context of awe.

Naturally, this perspective is little valued by today’s increasing emphasis on economic growth and technological development. Native leaders have long sought governmental assistance for their campaign to Aboriginal languages. Antone (2003, p. 10) insists that, unless something is done about it, at least 50 of Canada’s 54 Aboriginal languages will disappear in the next half century. The only ones remaining will be Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktituk, all of which have more than 1 000 speakers, and possibly Dakota Sioux which use seems to be increasing in use amongst the younger generation. Most school systems tend to add instruction in Aboriginal languages following an ESL model that is insufficient to help students maintain a working knowledge of their heritage language.

Language and Politics in Canada

Canadians appear to possess a high capacity for debate on language issues, many stemming from the passage of the Official Languages Act in 1969 (Elliott and Fleras, 1992, p. 210). This legislation was quickly followed by the enactment of Canada’s multicultural policy in 1971. After the two official languages were adopted, many minorities attempted to seek official governmental recognition of their languages as well, but this did not occur. After all, official recognition of language is politically laden because knowledge of recognized languages is powerful. Those who make laws in a specific language simultaneously forge specific meanings for citizen behavior. Hence, countries like Canada embark on blatantly overt or underlying assimilationist endeavors. Incoming peoples *must* learn one of the country’s official languages. The argument is that those who are mainly fluent in a language other than an official language will not have opportunity to succeed economically on the same footing as citizens who *are* able to function in one of the official languages.

Canada’s record in attempting to assimilate incoming minorities has been an underlying goal, more so, in fact, than its multicultural policy boasts. Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882), often known as the “Founder of Canadian (English speaking) education” (McNeill, 1974, p. 118), endorsed minority cultures, but insisted that they become English-speaking. Some researchers suspect that his real target was to transform Francophone culture in Ontario,

although the evidence for this is minimal. In Ryerson's words: "The youthful mind of Canada must be matured and molded if this country is long to remain an appendage of the British Crown" (Gaffield, 1987, p. 12). As superintendent of English-speaking schools, Ryerson wanted students to achieve the wealth and glory of his fatherland, including an understanding of British history and literature. In his opinion, comprehensive education would include familiarity with British achievements as well as British civil and social institutions.

Despite public announcements to the contrary, attempting to assimilate ethnic minorities into the Canadian mainstream has been an underlying goal of Canadian governments since the origin of the country in 1867. This goal is certainly true of ESL programs which, of themselves, are an unsuccessful means of preserving heritage languages. ESL programs unrelentingly foster integration into mainstream Canada.

No one knows more about cultural and linguistic loss than Canada's First Peoples whose first occupation of Canada remains veiled in mystery. Many Aboriginal writers have drawn attention to what the late Harold Cardinal, first president of the Indian Association of Alberta, called "hypocritical policy statements" (Cardinal, 1969, p. 28). Cardinal insisted that whatever Canadian government leaders might promise First Nations about cultural maintenance would be disregarded by the Native peoples of Canada. In his words:

Our people no longer believe. It is that simple and it is that sad. The Canadian Government can promise involvement, consultation, progressive human and economic development programmes. We will no longer believe them. The Canadian government can guarantee the most attractive system of education. We will not believe them. They can tell us their beautiful plans for the development of local self-government. We will shrug our disbelief. The government can create a hundred national Indian advisory councils to advise is about our problems. We will not listen to them (Cardinal, 1969, p. 27).

As the decades have rolled into the twenty-first century, many Indigenous writers have echoed Cardinal's lament (Battiste 2000; Kirkness, 1998; Leavitt, 1993). These writers do not put much faith in schools as successful institutions of language maintenance. It must be

acknowledged that some schools *have* made great strides in addressing the problem, but few actually produce materials in Aboriginal languages (Egbo, 2009, p. 74). This task is often left to local Indigenous communities who lack sufficient financial resources to get the job done.

The final section of this paper will briefly elaborate four specific components of needed address by educators: (a) Recognizing and seeking to define the challenge of cultural/linguistic diversity; (b) Affirming the inadequacies of standardized forms of assessment; (c) Fostering cultural/linguistic appreciation, and, (d) Enhancing public awareness.

Conclusion: Educational Implications

Language minority students present a special challenge to educational institutions because of the varying cultural backgrounds and linguistic diversity they represent. It must *first* be recognized that minority culture students may have excellent reading, writing, and speaking skills in their heritage languages that unfortunately do not match those required in state-sponsored classrooms. This lack of match does not imply that these students are in any way less intelligent than their peers. What it does mean is that they present a special challenge for classroom teachers. If this situation is ineptly handled, it can be a formula for failure, despite the gifts that these students may have (Garcia, 1994, p. 31).

Second, when working with second language students, educators should tread lightly with the use of intelligent tests, or other forms of “standardized” assessment. These devices may provide unreliable results because such tools rely heavily on language — primarily the English language (Ashworth, 1988, pp. 146f; Gollnick and Chinn, 1986, p. 156). Using standard assessment tools may place minority students in unfair competitions. As a result, their abilities may not be fairly evaluated. This reality may trigger a call for increased and upgraded ESL programs, which have already been proven ineffective.

A *third* observation has to do with cultural appreciation. Both Canada and the United States promote the concept of appreciating cultural diversity, although both fall short in developing functional intercultural programs. The ability of classroom teachers to recognize

and appreciate the value of each language cultural group, and be able to adjust classroom conditions to treat fairly those abilities will to some extent determine the efficacy of a nation's multicultural policy. *This ability has far-reaching implications for teacher education.* Here the current emphasis on developing an interdisciplinary approach to language instruction has a great deal of merit. Such an approach would include insights and strategies incorporated in other disciplines such as composition studies, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, genre analysis, and linguistics and translation. My own preference would be to offer cultural studies in teacher education faculties so that future teachers might come to appreciate the impacting factor that cultural values and beliefs (to say nothing of language), figure in socialization.

A *fourth* observation has to do with the need for increased public awareness and education regarding the richness of cultural diversity. Although schools directly can probably do less in this regard than the public media, meeting *that* challenge will require meaningful input from a multiplicity of avenues — public media, schools, postsecondary institutions, governments, and community agencies.

In the final analysis, however, the nature of respectful one-on-one association — teacher and student (regardless of background), is probably the most significant factor in enhancing student learning. In the words of the late Mark Hopkins (1882-1887) of Williams College, “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.” Surely this unique formula would also prove most effective in a multicultural, linguistically-diverse context.

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