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Discussion Note

Language and indigeneity: A mechanism of identity?

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Work in indigenous language revitalization often justifies itself along using one of two arguments: the intrinsic good of diversity and the importance of language in constructing indigenous identity. This article examines the second argument, first analyzing modern trends in the conception of indigenous identity and its link to language, and then uses two recent studies in indigenous language loss from South America and North America to determine the role of indigenous language in the production of indigenous identity. The result is that indigenous language serves as a linguistic mechanism of othering – the creation of an out-group with language as the criterion of exclusivity, and as a means of transmitting a romanticized image of indigenous people through indexicalizing such into indigenous language use. However, this article points out that the debate is far from over and that further research is need in the field of indigeneity and language.

Keywords: language revitalization, indigenous language, indigenous identity

1 Introduction

The revitalization of indigenous languages is the pursuit of many a linguist and community, and it deeply romanticized by the linguist, communities and society at broad alike. While many value the revitalization of languages for the sake of diversity and the benefits that diversity brings (Crystal, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002), others argue for the connection that indigenous languages have to the cultural identity of the indigenous community in question. That the loss of a language equates to the loss of an identity is attested to by many authors and this is often the purpose of government enforced linguicide (linguistic genocide) (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010; Zwisler, 2015). Indeed, much modern policy has been made in response to past (and often present) linguicide and identity is a frequent argument inside these policies. Hence a clear understanding of the link between language and indigenous identity is crucial for the effective execution of language policy and language revitalization.

However, the link between indigenous identity and language is far from clear as evidence from both sides of the argument is persuasive. As such, this article will critically look at perceptions of the link between indigenous language and identity and will then look at the mechanisms of this link through two similar

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recent multigenerational studies of indigenous identity and language loss – one in North America and another in South America.

2 Indigenous identity

Indigenous identity has no one agreed upon meaning and definitions of indigeneity differ in the breadth of flexibility and the number of criteria imposed for membership into indigeneity. Classifications of indigenous identity can be divided into three broad camps: self-classification, academic classification and institutional classification (Corntassel, 2003). In terms of self-classification, quite understandably, the door opens to a wide range of equally flexible and inflexible definitions and conceptions of the indigenous self. Examples range from simply being a descendent of the original inhabitants e.g., the Xocó of Brazil (Hoffman-French, 2004) to a demanding list of physical, cultural and behavioral qualities e.g., the Camëntsá of Colombia (Jamiouy-Juagibioy, 2005).

Meanwhile, for academics the trend is to define indigeneity in terms of being the original inhabitants of an area or at least the direct descendents and current resistance to colonial governments (Wilmer, 1993). In particular, there needs to be define a history that is separate to the nation-state – importantly the history told by the group must be told in opposition to colonists and the group must actively seek the control the group's own political future (Alfred & Wilmer, 1997).

Institutions, particularly state and international institutions, tend towards stricter more codified definitions of identity. Governments may range from more flexible criteria such as being a descendent of the original inhabitants and maintaining cultural customs (e.g., Colombia (República de Colombia, 1991)) to demanding blood quanta (e.g., the United States of America and Australia (Maddison, 2013)). International bodies may be particularly strict and demand rather a lot, such as the World Bank which has five strict criteria that exclude many who would self-classify as indigenous (World Bank Group, 2001); or be extremely flexible such as the UN which fails to produce a standard for indigeneity in both the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) and in the General Assembly declaration on the role of indigenous languages (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

As can be seen, the three groups differ widely in how indigeneity is considered and the criteria can evidently be seen in terms of the political motivations of each group. Indeed, if a group can be classified as indigenous by one of the three groups, that does not guarantee classification by the other two.

3 The connection to language

Language plays an interesting but inconstant role in definitions regarding indigeneity. In the classification of indigeneity, language has a varying role in the aforementioned types of classification. Self-classification, as expected, has no consensus on language use in regards to indigeneity. The previously mentioned Xocó and Camëntsá illustrate this: The Xocó have no indigenous language and as such don't stipulate one in their concept of indigeneity, but the Camëntsá not only have one but demand it in other indigenous peoples (Hoffman-French, 2004,

Jamiouy-Juagibioy, 2005). Being so, indigenous language is not a constant criterion among indigenous groups.

Academic classification falls into the same pattern. Many academics state the tie between culture, language and indigeneity, and stipulate that language forms a unique carrier of indigenous history and memory, and that it plays a special role in the religion of the group (Green, 2009; Shaw, 2001), while there are others who doubt its importance as a central marker of identity (Schmidt, 2008). As for institutions, the World Bank is almost alone in demanding an indigenous language in order to receive indigenous classification (Corntassel, 2003; World Bank Group, 2001) – no others are on record as demanding an indigenous language. Thus we see that in the three types of classification, language plays an erratic role at best – there is no consistent place for it as a genuine marker of indigeneity. Hence, the connection to language though is perhaps not best understood through classifications but through the experiences of those who have lost their language.

Language loss is a recurring theme all around the world and it is not difficult to find examples of how people feel after having lost the language of their ethnicity. Common feelings are of loss, anger and a sense of losing an important part of the self (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and Culture, 2005; Green, 2009; Shaw, 2001), and often rage or shame at the constant reminder of conquest that comes with using the colonist's language (Gregory, 1995; Reyhner, 2010). From the experiences of those who have lost it, indigenous language does actually seem to be pivotal part of identity, what remains to ask is how does it function in terms of identity?

4 The studies

Two studies were carried in 2014 and 2015 in the United States of America and Colombia respectively that could possibly shed light on the importance of language in indigeneity. Both studies examined the effects of language loss on indigenous identity over four generations. By examining identity change in indigenous communities after language loss, it is possible to examine the relationship between language and indigeneity, and how language is used to cast indigenous identity.

The Delgado-Olson (2014) study interviewed four generations of members of the Miwok Nation from the United States of America and interviewed a total of five people. The Miwok Nation is currently losing its language and the study examined how the generations were reacting to the gradual loss of the language, how the transmission of the language was failing and how these factors affected how the participants imagined their identities as indigenous people. The results of the study showed that the nation experienced regret, anger, sadness and certain external classification due to the lack of an indigenous language: the participants were either classed as Mexican or part Asian due to the combination of their physical appearance and their lack of Miwok usage. As the generations lose language, it is interesting and important to note that identity as a Miwok indigenous person becomes weaker – however the identity does remain.

The Zwisler (2015) study worked with the Pijao Nation in Colombia who last heard their language spoken in the 1950s. The study used four focus groups over the four generations since the loss of the language to talk about indigenous

identity and to see how indigenous identity had changed since the 1950s. In the four generations that had passed since language loss, indigenous identity went from a strong conception with many criteria to a weak idea with only one extremely flexible criteria (living in said area). The participants also felt the same spectrum of feelings seen in the Delgado-Olson (2014) study and also suffered misrepresentation by others – in this case, the Pijao was perceived as 'Mestizos': Colombians of mixed Amerindian/European heritage, but not considered 'pure-blooded' indigenous people. Yet, as mentioned the in Miwok study, the identity remained.

In both cases, indigenous identity was not affected by the in-group as such: it was not the indigenous group losing its sense of 'indigeneity' as a direct result of language loss. In both cases, the loss of identity resulted from out-groups not identifying the groups as indigenous as the out-groups had previously used language as a chief marker of indigeneity.

5 Indigenous language as a mechanism of identity

While the emotions shown in both studies are interesting and compelling reasons to revitalize endangered languages, the studies also offer an interesting insight into how indigenous language works as a mechanism of producing said identity. Both groups were able to articulate their respective histories and as such, language as the unique carrier of history is a wobbly argument. However, the fact that identity suffers provides us with an interesting insight into indigenous languages and here we may have the key to understanding language's role in the creation and maintenance of indigenous identity. In both cases, outside perception of indigeneity limited the self-recognition of indigeneity thus telling us that languages plays two roles that are intimately connected: the ability to 'other' and be 'othered', and the ability to access the indexicality of indigenous language.

Rajogopalan (2001) notes that language is a tool for flagging political allegiance to one group or another, and Byram (2006) states that one of the purposes of language is to create in-groups and out-groups with language as the tool of exclusivity. This is what seems to be the case with indigenous language. As mentioned in the classifications of indigeneity, indigenous identity is constructed opposite colonist identity and in the Olson-Delgado (2014) and Zwisler (2015) studies without an indigenous language; non-indigenous people tend to classify indigenous persons as non-indigenous. Over the course of generations, this misclassification results in weaker indigenous identity and a weaker conception of indigeneity.

Hence we are lead to the idea that the role of indigenous language is to be found in 'othering': the sociological term for excluding a person/people from an in-group and divorcing them from the 'I'. By lacking the tool (in this case indigenous language), indigenous peoples who have lost their language cannot 'other' colonists and, perhaps most importantly, cannot be 'othered' by the colonists as being a member of the indigenous outgroup and this ties into the second function of indigenous language: indexicality.

Colonist language is indexical of colonist identity; this is attested to by Gregory (1995) and Reyhner (2010) who state that every time they speak English they are reminded of the conquest of their people and their subsequent submission. It is also noted in the Zwisler (2015) study by the Pijao who state

that other indigenous groups (who still have their native languages) reject the group as being Mestizo/colonist due to the association of colonization with Spanish. While the groups who have lost their language still retain some semblance of indigenous identity and this is transmitted through the imposed colonist language (in these cases English and Spanish respectively), but this reduced identity suffers with each generation that passes without the native language.

From the cases, we can ascertain that indigenous language works as thus: it is a tool with which indigenous people can be 'othered' as the indigenous out-group by the colonist majority, but othered as the bearers of a language which bears the romanticized indexicality of the pre-colonization civilization. Where a group has lost its language it will no longer be able to be othered and will be cut off from the othered indigeneity expressed in all of the classifications of indigeneity, and as such will lose indigenous identity as the generations progress.

6 Conclusion

Studies of generational indigenous identity do not show a link between history transmission and language – the loss of history seems to be more a result of social restrictions placed upon religious practice. However, they do show a strong link between language and the process of being othered as an indigenous person. Without a native language, the colonist majority tends to misclassify the indigenous persons as colonists or Mestizos. Thus we can understand indigenous language to be a mechanism for the othering process and extension of a romanticized linguistic indexicality to the indigenous individuals. However, the process of othering is not the sole factor nor the most important criterion in indigeneity as one can see indigenous groups (suchs as the aforementioned Xocó) that are without an indigenous language but have strong enough internal recognition to overcome the need for the external othering.

The cases shown here do add weight to the classifications of indigeneity in opposition to colonist identity and the force of language in indigenous classification, however they are not enough to counter arguments of groups without indigenous languages. More research needs to be done into language and indigeneity, and significantly more research needs to be done in terms of history being transmitted uniquely through indigenous language. Until we have more information, the debate regarding language and indigenous identity will continue raging.

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