

By Whose Standards Do We Speak?

by Silja Kallenbach

Language and Identity

Our identities as human beings are bound up with language. The language we speak, and how we speak it, express who we are and where we come from. Take away a person's language and you take away a part of her sense of self, and her culture. This is as true for the hard-of-hearing person who uses sign language as it is for me, who learned first to speak Finnish.

The language we speak is bound up with our experience and environment. The word for the same reality feels different in different languages. Eva Hoffman gives a good example of this in her book, *Lost in Translation*, which is about her experience of immigrating to the United States from Poland at the age of 13. She writes, "The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke" (p.106). Language comes to life through experiences that take place in specific environments. This implies that in an ESOL class, in order to learn new vocabulary and expressions, we need to have experiences that make them memorable.

Language Prejudice

Different environments, situations and people call for different ways of using language. There are more or less formal ways of using language. Most of us have learned to speak more formally to people in positions of authority than with our friends and family. We have learned that we can be judged by the variation of the language we speak. But we might not realize just how much the way we speak affects how we and our children are perceived and judged.

In one study, student teachers were asked to judge eight hypothetical school children's intelligence, self-confidence, and whether they were good students. For each student, the teachers were given a photograph of the student, a sample of schoolwork (an essay and a drawing), and a tape-recorded sample of the student's speech. Each piece of information was based on a real child, but the pieces were mixed so that each child would have an equal number of positive and negative judgments. The surprising result was that the way the students spoke affected the teachers' judgments more than the students' schoolwork, or how they looked. For each teacher, it was the students' way of speaking that determined a favorable or unfavorable impression. Students whose speech reflected a lower social class were judged more negatively.

Dialects and Standard Language

Most people speak some kind of a dialect. Dialects are variations of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary that are specific to the language spoken in a particular region or by a specific group of people. In the United States, for example, there are many different dialects. The language of someone from the deep South is usually recognizable as being different from that spoken in the Northern states. Many African-Americans speak a variation of English called Ebonics. People of French-Canadian origin in northern Maine speak a dialect that is influenced by French. And so on.

Dialects contrast with what a country considers its standard language. This is the language of dictionaries and grammar books. It is what schools teach and by which they measure students' achievement. Some dialects match more closely what is considered the standard language than others.

But who decides what is standard language? Research shows that it is people with more social prestige. Naturally, they choose the variation they speak, in most cases, the language of the educated and the wealthy. It is this language that then becomes the standard by which all speech is judged, at least by those in power.

The Myth of Superiority of Standard Language

The notion that one way of speaking is better than another is culturally learned. Yet, most of us have bought the myth that standard language is somehow better than a dialect. Linguists, people who study languages, say that no language or dialect is inherently superior to another.

All languages and dialects are systematic and complex. They have their own sets of rules, and reflect and serve the needs of the community that speaks them. Their vocabularies, for example, reflect the preoccupations of the speakers. So, the Inuits of Alaska have many words for different kinds of snow because they live in a cold climate and need to be able to distinguish types of snow for their survival. Many Native American languages do not distinguish between the past, present and future tense because in those cultures time is a more indefinite and fluid concept. Computer-related vocabulary is primarily in English because that technology developed quickly in our culture. Yet one hundred years ago we did not have any computer vocabulary in English. A mouse was still just a rodent, and memory was something you lost with old age. Languages are alive, and like all living things they change and evolve.

Conclusion

Each person has to consider the consequences associated with choosing to speak one dialect or another. We need to figure out how to preserve the languages and dialects that make up our sense of identity. At the same time, we need to be savvy to use the language of power when the situation calls for it. And we need to question why one way of speaking carries more power than another.

From: The Change Agent, Volume 16 - Language and Power
<http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/selectedArticles/article2.htm>

References

“Some Basic Sociolinguistic Concepts” by Stubbs, M. in *The Skin That We Speak*, edited by Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. New York, NY: The New Press, 2002.

Lost in Translation, Hoffman, E. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

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Post reading questions:

Choose one. Respond. Typed, doubles spaced.

1. How is your personal identity connected with your language: **what** you speak, the **way** you speak it.
2. What is your experience with the myths or prejudice of language?
3. “Take away a person’s language and you take away a part of her sense of self, and her culture.” What are your thoughts on this quote?
4. Why does one way of speaking carry more power than another?
5. Does code-switching support the idea of cultural relativism? [you might need to look this up] Are they separate or distinct from one another? What are your thoughts on code-switching?