The Effect of Language on Ethnicity in a Multicultural Setting

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1 Introduction

This essay analyses the importance and significance of language in shaping ethnicity within multicultural Melbourne. An in-depth 35-minute interview was conducted with a University of Melbourne third-year Science student to explore the roles of language and discourses of ethnicity in shaping subjectivity. Despite being multicultural and priding itself as being accepting of diversity, Australia is still predominantly white, and minority groups can sometimes be subjected to racism or feel a need to assimilate so completely that they lose ties with their ethnicity. This report will examine how Henry, a Malaysian citizen and now Australian permanent resident, navigated and continues to navigate through this discourse of ethnicity in the context of Melbourne, shaping his subjectivity in the process. Calling himself a Malaysian-Chinese, his ethnic identity is strongly connected with language, but, as will be detailed later, his loss of his ethnic languages has caused a loosening of ties with his ethnicity. Increasingly, he sees himself as simply Australian, or as an Australian Born Chinese (ABC). I will also reflect on my own experiences as a 2nd generation migrant and as an ABC, exploring how language has shaped my subjectivity.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's definition of discourse, this report looks at the 'big D discourse' (Gee, 2015) – 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about [...] a particular topic' (Hall, 1992, p. 291). Certain rules and conventions within every societal discourse dictate how one is expected to speak, think, and conduct oneself. Consequently, it is these 'socially-based group conventions' that allow the formation of identities (Gee, 2015, p. 420). Indeed, vital to language and the creation of identity is the notion of subject and subjectivity. Foucault explains that the 'subject is produced within discourse' (Hall, 1997, p. 55). The subject chooses a position within the discourse created by the discourse itself to form their own meaning and identity. Without a subject position within the discourse, however, the subject is meaningless (Hall, 1997, p. 56). This essay however, approaches subjectivity in a manner similar to Judith Butler, whereby more agency is expressed than by Foucault's passive subjects. By this analysis, identity is performed, with subjects choosing to actively prove and reaffirm their identity through habitual conformity to the norms of the discourse. As Pennycook (2004, p. 1) puts it, 'identities are formed in the linguistic performance rather than pregiven'.

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2 Analysis

2.1 Defining Ethnicity

To properly examine the relationship between language and ethnicity, "ethnicity" itself must first be defined. It is a vague and broad term that can be difficult to define succinctly, but Padilla encapsulates it well:

> An individual's membership in a social group that shares a common ancestral heritage [including] the biological, cultural, social, and psychological domains of life' (Padilla, 1999, p. 115).

Henry's views of ethnicity mirror Padilla's. He calls himself specifically Malaysian-Chinese rather than Malaysian, as he shares a common ancestry in many areas of life with other Malaysian-Chinese whose families migrated from China to Malaysia:

> [1:03] ... ethnicity is ... to identity myself amongst other people. Because if you say you are Malaysian, you could be Malaysian-Malay, Malaysian-Indian, or Malaysian-Chinese. So, back in Malaysia, how we identified ourselves was to say we are Malaysian-Chinese.

By identifying as Malaysian-Chinese, he separates himself from Malaysians of other ethnicities, such as Indians and the Indigenous population, forming a binary of "us": Malaysian-Chinese and "them": other Malaysians. For myself, identifying as Chinese or Australian-Chinese is also a way to distinguish myself from the "them" group in my own context – the white Western subject position. Where Henry and I differ is that being Asian in Malaysia is not seen as "the other". In a still predominantly white Australia, I feel that Western discourse has constructed a "Caucasian norm", classifying "Asian" as abnormal and deviant, and thus 'privileg[ing] one half of the binary over the other' (Hawthorne, 2016, p. 79). As Milestone and Meyer put it:

> ...discourses produce knowledge [which]...classifies certain...characteristics as abnormal and deviant and thereby produces the norm (2012, p. 24).

By labelling ourselves as Malaysian-Chinese or ABC, we are reiterating our identities as Butler describes, constructing our identity by defining ourselves as what others are not. One way of defining oneself is showing proficiency in a language; after all, language often defines ethnicity (Bucholtz, 1995, p. 357).

2.2 Language and Ethnicity

When addressing ethnicity, language cannot be neglected, as the two are intertwined. Language in some ways defines ethnicity, for it carries forward the history and culture of an ethnic group (Igoudin, 2013, p. 51). Language and ethnicity have a 'mutual bond', whereby language can demarcate ethnic identity (Granhemat & Abdullah, 2017, p. 27). For Henry, the Malaysian-Chinese ethnicity is very closely connected to certain (heritage) languages; inability to speak these ethnic languages disqualifies full membership to the Malaysian-Chinese ethnic group:

> [4:30] If I were to truly be a Malaysian-Chinese, I should be able to converse in Chinese, Cantonese or Hokkien, and most importantly English.

As Henry's proficiency in Mandarin and Cantonese slowly slipped from intermediate to a beginner level, he feels his ties with his Malaysian-Chinese ethnicity weakened. As Fought elucidates, those who do not speak their heritage or ethnic language may find their ethnicity called into question (2006, p. 31) and experience disconnection:

> [11:58] I lost my Malaysian-Chinese self…when I lost my languages.
>
> [13:33] I lost my Chinese-Malaysian identity, which also meant losing my languages.

Undoubtedly, language and ethnicity are securely bound together. In Bucholtz's interviews, one of her participants claims that 'language is the glue that binds her to her ethnic identity' (1995, p. 357), and that loss of heritage languages results in loss of ethnic identity. Oftentimes, it is the ability to speak certain languages that provides membership into an ethnic group (Bailey, 2000).

> [13:48] When you're Australian, you're not known to have these languages associated to you, compared to Chinese-Malaysian where for sure you're meant to have these languages.

Consequently, Henry feels disappointed in himself for losing his heritage languages and not appreciating the linguistic advantage he had in a multicultural Malaysia. As one's ethnic identity changes over time, so too does the relationship with one's heritage or ethnic identity (Fought, 2006, p. 22). His slow loss of his Malaysian-Chinese ethnicity has evoked self-reflection and dismay at his younger self:

> [3:19] …disappointed in myself for not seeing the importance of language when I was young.
>
> [3:48] …can't effectively communicate'.

Fortunately, Henry is not subjected to much of the stigma that often comes from not speaking a heritage language. He does not feel shame, although he is disappointed that he cannot speak his ethnic languages ([3:13]). While his mother does pressure him somewhat to learn his ethnic language, it often does not amount to much action:

> [6:22] With my mum, she does pressure me to learn Hokkien, but then she drops it off, so I wouldn't say there is a lot of pressure.

In addition, his older cousins do not speak the ethnic language ([21:31]), thus there is no immediate precedent or pressure for Henry to learn Hokkien seriously. This is in contrast to my own experiences – my mother instilled in me the idea that not speaking my ethnic languages (Cantonese and Mandarin) would be shameful, and thus forced me to learn these languages from a young age. My mother's ideology is a clear demonstration of how 'inability to use a code associated with ethnicity is stigmatized' (Fought, 2006, p. 29). At home I was only allowed to speak

Cantonese, and on weekends, I attended Mandarin classes. However, as reluctant as I was to learn these languages as a child, I now actively choose to improve my language skills, demonstrating that attitudes towards maintaining an ethnic language is not fixed but can change over time (Schecter & Bayley, 2002).

2.3 Passing and Fluid Identity

Passing is an interesting phenomenon that enables an individual to "pass-off" as someone from a social group that is not their own (Bucholtz, 1995, p. 351). In terms of ethnicity and language, the interconnectedness of the two are so strong that an individual is sometimes able to pass as a certain ethnicity, purely from their use of 'linguistic practices associated with a given ethnic group' (Bucholtz, 1995, p. 355). Linguistic practices include accent and syntax of a language or language variety, thus while Henry still identifies as Malaysian-Chinese, he often passes as someone who is not Malaysian-Chinese based on his lack of Malaysian accent and lack of broken English:

> [7:43] I talk to a lot of people and when I say I'm Malaysian, they're like "wait, what, where's your accent?" ... I just don't have that broken English.

People's surprise at Henry's ethnicity can be explained with reference to Hewitt's research on African-Americans. He found that an individual could be classified as 'not black' if they failed to use Creole (1986, p. 107). For Henry, his lack of a Malaysian accent or broken English syntax has the power to disqualify him as a Malaysian, and his quasi-Australian accent is sufficient to pass as an Australian, or more specifically, an ABC.

> [10:17] ...eventually I developed an [Australian] accent...

> [8:28] I do consider people to see me as Australian.

Subsequently, having an Australian accent means Henry is constantly being 're-raced' (Sweetland, 2002) as Australian by other individuals, which may be further exacerbating the deterioration of his Malaysian-Chinese ethnic identity as mentioned above. No longer sharing the ethnic languages or defining linguistic features of the Malaysian-Chinese identity, he finds relating to his ethnic identity increasingly difficult:

> [5:47] Sometimes I don't feel like I belong in my own country, in Malaysia that is.

> [8:59] When I come across my own people here, it's a bit hard to relate.

Fought explains this phenomenon of fluid and changing identity resultant of a shifting local or extralocal orientation. That is, whether the individual has strong ties with the local community, or is focused on opportunities and interaction beyond the community (2006, p. 24). For Henry, it can be said that he is now more "extralocally" oriented, where his strong ties with his local Malaysian community have dissipated and he is now more engrossed in the extralocal Australian community. His subjectivity has transformed from being a local Malaysian to a local Australian.

> [5:54] I see Malaysia as a tourist destination for me these days...[Australia] is my home now.

In terms of my own Australian accent, my linguistic practices and features mark me as Australian, while my physical appearance often gives away my Asian ethnicity, thus creating an Australian Born Asian identity. As Asia is a big area consisting of many ethnicities that may look similar physically, I am sometimes able to pass as "not" Chinese. I have 'access to multiple linguistic codes' so 'language [is] a powerful tool in displaying [my] ethnic self' (Bucholtz, 1995, p. 357), allowing me to fluctuate on a spectrum between Chinese and Australian ethnicity. Aware that Chinese people are sometimes known to be loud and rude, pretending to not speak Chinese is often a way to disassociate myself from the Chinese ethnicity. On the other hand, I sometimes exclusively speak Mandarin or Cantonese to highlight my Chinese ethnicity to gain better service or bargains at Chinese restaurants or shops. Interestingly, Williams found similar occurrences with Amerasians where linguistic passing was based on language inability: 'sometimes Amerasians pretended they could not speak either language, to get special attention or for mere convenience' (1992, p. 295). As a multilingual individual, my language choice is definitely influenced by the context and situation of the conversation (Fishman, 1972). Inextricably linked to language choice is deciding what identity to show, as Barrett illuminates:

> Speakers may heighten or diminish linguistic displays that index various aspects of their identities according to the context of an utterance and the specific goals they are trying to achieve (1999, p. 318).

We have multiple identities that can be evoked at any particular moment, depending on who we are interacting with. When serving Caucasian customers at work, I notice my Australian accent is broader than when speaking with my ABC friends, emphasising my Australian ethnicity around white Australians. Henry also has similar experiences, becoming "more Australian" when around Caucasian colleagues:

> [29:32] If I were to talk to another ABC…I wouldn't say "mate". Wow, I never noticed that. With white Australians, I do become "more Australian"…
>
> [30:27] Take an example, say Harry, yeah I would use "mate".

Accentuating our Australian ethnicity while simultaneously diminishing our Asian identities when talking to Caucasians may be an act of self-consciousness in a Western country, or a way to form closer bonds with someone by being similar to them. Either way, it seems that both Henry and I attempt to assimilate to the dominant subject position. This is shown by us highlighting our Asian ethnicity amongst fellow Asians while heightening our Australian ethnicity amongst Caucasians.

3 Conclusion

Language and ethnicity are very much interconnected; a language can mark an ethnicity, while ethnicity often denotes linguistic proficiency in the associated ethnic language. For Henry, his diminishing Malaysian-Chinese identity can be attributed to his loss of proficiency in Mandarin and Cantonese, while his acquiring of the Australian accent has established a new ethnic identity for him to the extent others consider him Australian or ABC. My Chinese ethnicity is

also heavily tied to my languages, since it has been ingrained in me that I would be less Chinese and it would be shameful if I did not speak my ethnic languages. In conclusion, language has shaped the ethnic identity of ourselves and others.

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