

Role of Language and Culture in a Diasporic Society

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Abstract

The idea of writing this paper emerges from a random thought that evolves during the mental process of finding a difference between Culture and Status. The question puzzled me as Culture and Status are complementary to each other yet hold a unique position. Each unit has its own salient features and it is tricky to decide what comes first. Very next morning, I engaged the Master Students' ESL (English as a Second Language) class and collectively tried to understand the puzzling question. The response was, as usual, a mixed one. Some said both the words have separate identity and the other group found them intertwined. When students asked about my opinion, I said that I find them having separate identity. I elaborated further, saying that culture is metaphysical, status is physical; culture is rooted in ethnicity and status is acquired with hard work. The basic elements of culture – language, traditions, system of behavior, festivity, folklore etc, are nurtured through generations; status varies from generation to generation. Culture is intangible, status is tangible. Culture is a collective identity, status is an individual one. In a nutshell, status is acquired on the basis of personal graph of progress whereas culture is a birth-gift. A particular group may have an equal cultural identity but every member of this group might possess a separate status. Nevertheless, culture and status both come together under the umbrella of Society – a collective mass of the mono/multicultural followers.

Culture is a long term practice of set rules that invariably gets remodeled as the new cultures sweep into our heritage culture. These changes and modifications are inspired by the prevailing situation and so not static but subject to priority shift. A status in the whole gamut of socio-cultural setting, is an outcome of social hierarchy based on upward mobility on the path of progress. The intranational or international migration and multiple job opportunities across the world provide ample number of chances to grow professionally and thus attain the higher level of a rank – status. A noticeable rise in such mobilities has become instrumental in transforming a monocultural society into a multicultural society that eventually evolves as a hybrid society. This paper will focus on the role of language and culture in a diaspora society.

Key Words: Heritage Culture, International Migration, Multiculturalism, Hybrid Society,

Linguistic Inclusion:

An immigrant arrives to a new land with multiple anxieties and anticipations. A new arrival fights at two stages, with his adventurous and adaptive self. The global media has certainly not left anything unknown to anyone but the direct contact of the bunch of nuances baffles a new immigrant. Most of the initial period is spent in facing the challenges of adaptation – solving the crisscross of new language, food, clothing and life styles. Starting with the need of a flat-pin charger, to the fanless ceilings and air conditioner/heater installed walls, right side driving, flameless electric stoves, bucket-free bathrooms, electric dishwasher, paid laundry services and finally accepting the veggi burger with chader cheese (for strictly vegetarians) and to the top of it, living without any domestic help is a challenge task for survival. It is only over a course of time and practice that an immigrant is able to digest all shocks and consider the new pattern of life as normal. It is now that one starts respecting the identity of the ‘other’. But religion and language are the two huge areas that an immigrant practically keeps intact as that is found as buffer zone to the homesickness. An immigrant makes all positive efforts to stick to his/her religion. The sense of strict religious feeling - “it never happens in our religion” is stronger as the migrant does not want the religious community back home to consider him/her as one who has dropped the religious identity. This migrant would actively participate in all the religious activities and will proudly keep the community aware of his religious involvements. The ethnic language is also preserved to keep the solidarity with the ethnic community left behind. Simultaneously, eh/she also adopts the language of the new land. This linguistic adaptability works at three stages:

1. Elementary: Simple linguistic expressions with routine adjectives and adverbs
2. Secondary: Linguistic expressions with the use of a certain set of common idioms and phrases
3. Higher: An accurate command over the linguistic expressions with a certain amount of contextual proverbs and also mythological and historical references.

As we can understand, the first two stages have more of an informal way of linguistic expressions. At the first stage the non-native English speaker passes through the process of learning than delivering. Here, the speaker takes support of paralinguistics like body language, facial expressions, hand gestures and body postures. It is only with a very few common/abstract (all situation fitting) adjectives like good, nice, big, proper etc., that they communicate.

e.g: Alex is a good driver.

It is a nice shop.

It is a big house.

I saw two drivers driving their cars at proper distance.

It is not surprising to interchange the adjectives without affecting the broader meaning of the contents of these sentences. The lack of linguistic accuracy obstructs the cultural inclusion into the mainstream and the adoptee tries to shun her/himself as much as possible. The second stage speaker is well-acquainted with English as a second language. This speaker has a relatively more accurate hold over the basic grammar and so the sentences are well structured with lesser chances of goofs in the selection of adjectives.

e.g: Alex is an efficient driver.

It is a well-equipped shop.

It is a spacious house.

I saw two drivers driving their cars at an adequate distance.

Here, the interchangeability of the adjectives is not possible as each possesses a definitive potentiality. The second stage speaker possesses adequate knowledge in using the appropriate parts of grammar like noun forms, adjectives, adverbs etc. And the third stage speaker is proficient in using idioms, phrases and also adages. It is a noteworthy point that when sentences are uttered with correct expressions, the scope for mainstream cultural inclusion is relatively widened. The problem with the beginner of English Language Learner is to comprehend the cultural reference associated with the idioms and adages. Idioms and adages need contextual clarity and also the comprehensive understanding of the demography of the culture. Such idioms may create confusions for non native speakers. Eg. The use of the idiom “as hot as devil’s armpit” is a routine expression in the American State of Southern Illinois where the month of June is the hottest and the direct sunlight makes life unbearable. Think about a situation, when under the scorching heat of the 120F temperature the native as well as non Americans, were celebrating the American Independence Day. It was in this backdrop, a native finds the heat exceptionally torturing and so utters, “Oh Jesus! It’s as hot as devil’s armpit”. This expression seeks contextual clarity for the non-Americans. The speaker elaborated that she finds the sun deadly hot.

Once during an English as a Second Language class in India, I was explaining how idioms like ‘raining cats and dogs’ and ‘keeping all eggs in one basket’ have geographical or cultural context respectively. It was difficult for the students from the low average rain area to imagine the torrential rain as the falling of *cats* and *dogs*. But they accepted the arguments about the geographical connotation to the idiom, though a little jocundly. More funny was the story behind teaching the second idiom ‘keeping all eggs in one basket’. The vegetarian crowd of the state of Gujarat said, “ma’am, we do not eat eggs so there is no question of putting them in any basket”. (For a moment, I felt like replacing eggs with tomatoes). My explanation about the eggs being the staple ingredient of the English speaking countries was accepted and thus the idiom was finally interpreted as a metaphorical elaboration to the investment strategy. The pictorial presentation for such idioms assisted me in the

explanations. This proves that there can not be a literal translation of the idioms or saying as they are rooted in the culture of the region.

The non native speakers find it difficult to decode the cultural context in such idioms. In contrast to such speakers, a child getting education in schools where English is the only medium to communicate develops an authoritative hold over the adopted language. He/she also nurtures a different attitude and approach towards English as a Second Language. Such cases are noticed more in the diaspora communities. While the first generation migrants struggle to understand the language of their adopted land, the second generation young school going kids naturally capture the language as well as the accent. With the lesser surrounding of ethnic culture, this speaker does not have to struggle between the mother language and the adopted language. Such a speaker finds him/herself at home with both the languages. But the first generation immigrants face the dilemma of acceptance and rejections, addition and subtraction, inclusion and exclusion of ethnic and adopted cultural values.

There is no such dilemma for the natural citizen (citizen by birth) on the adopted land. Such speakers imbibe the heritage language and also feel equally at ease with the language of adoption. For them, domestic language is a language of their origin and acquired language is for the professional commitments. Some of these natural speakers also acquire a good command over the accent of the adopted language. But the case may vary when mother tongue pull is stronger and so the accent is not mastered. Nevertheless, their proficiency speaks for their comfort with the adopted language.

Cultural Inclusion:

The word culture is a mix of behaviour, communities, moral ethics, life style, art and folklore, history, customs, traditions and mannerisms. In the book *American Ways*, Gary Athens and Janet Bennette write about American Culture that stands on the four pillars of **Individuality, Equality, Humanity and Mobility**. In the postmodern world, these four pillars hold testimony in all progressive cultures. The concept of **individuality** is about independence, self-reliance, exploring new avenues and setting benchmark, giving importance to the private space, spending time for self, being possessive, self-satisfactory, competitive yet balanced in attitude etc. A society with **equal laws** and regulations, irrespective of any class, creed, colour or ethnic differences is bound to flourish. Such a society would be focused and farsighted. For them, past is never a block but an inspiration either to follow or to learn from the mistake. The blame game is a burden to the individuals as well as to the nation. An example of the game of differences is cited by Tim et al about the Mestizos – the community belonging to the Mexican Hispanic culture and Indians residing in the suburbs of the USA. Both these ethnic groups have good income status but their living patterns are noticeably different. The researcher says,

Such differences can lead to highly negative perceptions about each other. Mestizos often contend that Indians are too unmotivated and constrained by tradition to deal appropriately with the demands of modern society. Indians, in turn, frequently complain that Mestizos are aggressive, impatient and disrespectful towards nature.

The societies with many such differing communal pockets may find it difficult to progress. Equality across all walks of lives would bring necessary changes to make it more future oriented and progressive. Human subjugation has no place in such society. Goodness of **humanity** is all about being simple, noble and loyal to the nation. Pretence and arrogance should be at bay and sympathy and natural admiration for people at mass is to be encouraged. The fourth pillar of any developed nation could be **Mobility**. As per a common saying “Fear makes one stagnant”, fighting with fear, mobility around the world, achievements, actions, work directness and assertiveness can be added as the features of success and progress. American punctuality is famous in its own way. During a trip to the USA it was personally observed that they are in firm obedience with time and work. The American version of time punctuality and commitment are accurately presented in the following adages heard commonly in the USA as written below:

1. To be before time is to be on time
To be on time is to be late
And
To be late is never accepted.
2. For Americans,
Difficult takes a while
And impossible is far away.

An immigrant, over a period of times, learns such behavioural patterns and thus enters into the mainstream culture.

Here it is necessary to understand the relation of language and culture with society. The intermingling roles of language, culture and society would be comprehended once studied separately. **Language** as defined by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 8th Edition, is “the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area”. **Culture** as defined by Terry Eagleton is “. . . The Latin root of the word ‘culture’ is *colere*, which can mean anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting” (2). Eagleton seems to be considering the idea of culture as based on the four pillars — cultivating, inhabiting, worshipping and protecting — the pillars that speak volumes of the word culture as well as the way it is being imprinted in the minds

and hearts of the people. The process of cultivation, if interpreted in an agrarian context, is about care and proper placing of a seed into a proper land. The process of cultivation responds positively when the fertile land allows the inhabitation of the properly placed seed. Diaspora also cultivates, absorbs, worships and protects its culture in the hostland. Worshipping leads to protection and protection is about understanding the need of time and place. Thus, culture is based on cultivation, inhabitation, worshipping and protection.

Eagleton defines **Society** in these words: "Society is made up of distinctive cultures . . . it is also a transcended entity called 'society', which nowhere appears as a specific culture but which is the measure and matrix of them all" (46). Thus, a particular culture designs a particular society. While talking about culture as the way of life, Eagleton quotes Raymond William's view that sees the scope of a culture "as usually proportionate to the area of a language rather than to the area of a class" (33). Eagleton finds his observation as limited and argues with the help of an example of English language that spans great many cultures. "More particularly post-modern culture covers a diverse span of languages" (33).

The word 'culture' is all inclusive and abstract. It is a set of systems, values, laws, beliefs, arts pertaining to a certain group of people. A. L. Krober and Clyde Kluckhohn note:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of the human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts, the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture system may on the one hand, be considered as products of actions, on the other as conditioning elements of further action . . . culture is not behaviour not the investigation of behaviour in all its concrete completeness. Part of culture consists in norms of standards of behaviour. Finally every culture includes broad general principles of selectivity and ordering in terms of which patterns of and for and about behaviour in very varied areas of culture content is reducible to parsimonious generalisation (Singer 528).

Life in diaspora creates a chance to come in contact with other communities/nationalities that widens the scope for cultural and linguistic inclusiveness. This cultural inclusivity provides a chance of sharing of histories, myths, folklore of different nations that is instrumental in removing the socio-linguistic and cultural barricades that encourages the diasporic to develop the sense of belongingness also to the land of adoption. Sophia Lehmann quotes Mints and writes:

The notion of developing cultural allegiances is an important one, for it helps to overturn essentialist constructions of race and ethnicity. Racially related cultural practices are based in learned ideas, rather than genetic composition. If the boundaries which define one culture and language are not rigidly defined, then neither are the boundaries which divide that culture from other cultures insurmountable. (Sophia 104)

While talking about the role of language in the environment of rapid cultural globalization, Gomati Bodra Hembrom quotes Oommen who proposes four perspective approaches towards language. 1. The traditionalist approach that focuses on protecting the ancestral language. 2. The nationalist approach that propagates the use of the nation recognized language (in India it is Hindi). 3. The modernist approach that favours the acquired official language over the mother tongue (in India, English) and 4. The pluralist approach “explicitly endorses the coexistence of different cultures within the same polity with dignity and is best suitable for polyglot India” (Devy et al., 9). In this statement, Oommen clearly shows how languages and cultures evolve with the changing and developing environment of a society. [Though, Oommen strictly believes that education in mother tongue is a more adequate and accurate way to make the culture and society strong). Similar opinion in favour of a pluralistic society is found when C.Lakshmana et al., write

It is in the company of others that [hu]man initiates deeds, which . . . bring him[/her] out in his uniqueness and unpredictability and make him[/her] immortal. Plurality, therefore, is the essential ground of culture as is freedom (2012: 143).

Thus, the understanding of the roles of language, culture and society and the concept of identity construct can be distinctly understood. As discussed, culture is a set of values, attitudes, beliefs, mindsets, collective attributes, opinions and agreements that are very much dynamic. Culture has a direct connection with emotions and loyalty and so it is deep rooted and long lasting. The multi-cultural and lingual society like India is rich with the religious, historical, architectural, literary, culinary manifestations. This pluralism is widened with the additional willing acceptance of English language and cultural traits. This plurality can surely be considered as a fulcrum to the progressive ambitions of the post colonial Indian diaspora.

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