

Exploring Role of Language in Constructing Individual Identities: A Case Study of Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

Language plays significant role in shaping individual identities and in distinguishing how one group is different from another group. Although a group may distinguish itself by its racial features, the type of dress its members wear, the food they eat, the houses they build or the group's totem, insignia, tattoos and specific practices, it is the language that distinguishes groups of people most precisely. This paper examines role of language in constructing individual identities in Pakistani context with a focus on how people leave their indigenous languages and choose any other powerful language to construct their identity. Main areas of this study are how language and different factors (historical, social, global, political etc) are responsible for making individual identities. Uniqueness of this paper lies in its investigation in this field and overview of different literary concepts on the topic. Due to nature of the research in the field, data was collected through questionnaires and interviews from the people belonging to different parts of Sindh. The results found that the way people speak multi languages in different contexts reflect their individual identity. Thus, this research may provide foundation for understanding the roles of language in constructing identities.

Keywords: Language, Indigenous Languages, Aspects of identity, Individual Identities.

1. Introduction

Language is as taken for granted by people all over world, just as air that we breathe or sun that we see rise every morning in the east. Members of society communicate, interact and socialize with the help of language. One of the important features that distinguish human beings from other animals, say dolphins and chimpanzees, is faculty of speech with which they are gifted. Our languages as also used in written form which informs us about information of global dealings. Moreover, language not only identifies any particular group but also sets its position inside that group, as it may distinguish one's dialect, social class, age, occupation, religion and even gender. Dependable with its view of language, Mark Pagel, a biologist, in his lecture in 2011 on how language has played a powerful role in evolution of human race and in constructing identities claims that language is "kind of influential, risky, and revolutionary peculiarity which is usual choice that has ever developed" (Pagel, 00:19). Thus, language constructs our ability of how to communicate and this ability makes human race advanced than any other group of living being.

Seeing that, Pagel said that language is "character of our genes" (Pagel, 12:57). Human beings are developed throughout the history because of language. New technologies are invented just because of language, that's why we have different identities in different domains. We are connected to the whole world with the help of language.

The satire of language is that it was formerly meant to help in communication but the problem arises when the community is facing multilingualism which is not merely obstacle transferring thoughts as speakers have different languages but it is also accountable for making dominancy of one language over other as is the case of Pakistan. This research aims to demonstrate that how multilinguals in Pakistani context are responsible for constructing individual identities. Researchers have highlighted some features which are answerable for making one language greater than other and also how does users start to exhibit identities associated with different languages. Language has major role in societies, communicative role; morning greetings, chatting with neighbors on any news, talk about many things, also gathering other communicative wants which is why it constructs identities as per requirement of the society. Just as, Bourdieu pointed that

“At level of relations between groups, language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to identity of person who utters it”. (1977, p. 652).

This research informs about the ways individual identities are being constructed due to language. The study displays that language identities are not constructed due to languages but they are formed in social, historical and political contexts. This research will help to lay out some of the more significant assumptions embodied in understandings role of language and its connection to individual identities. This paper gives a literature review section which traces different factors which are responsible for making language powerful and that powerful language help in constructing identities, followed by a description of research methodology section. In final section are findings and discussions summary will be measured.

Research objectives

- to understand the relation of language with individual identity
- to understand the reasons behind people leave their indigenous language and choose any powerful language to make their identity

Research Questions

- How far does language construct individual identities?
- Which factors make people leave their indigenous language and choose any powerful language to make their identity?

Significance of the study

This study investigates the relation of language with identity in general. In Pakistan, language is deemed to be source of communication. This study is significant in the sense that it provides sociolinguistic awareness not only to the researchers but also the common folk to develop their understanding about their own language which is an active agent and marker of their identity.

Theoretical Framework

Different researchers studied intimate and mutually constitutive relation between language as well as identities. Language is not only considered the means of identity construction, but with its help understanding of others identity is being built. According to researchers language is the site of identity and identities are the results of language, it is the chief arena for its cooperation. (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001; Ros i Solé, 2004; Shi, 2006).

Identity constructs and is constructed by language. Identity is foundation based on the acknowledgment of shared source including ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical, territorial, cultural and political attributes with other people, groups or ideal. (Hall, 1994, 1996). Hall elaborates that identities as “a process never completed and logged in contingency” (1996, p. 2). Identity is not an ending process, it goes on. It is continuously changing and transforming within historical, social and cultural developments and practices such as globalization, modernity, and new innovations in technology. It is language that plays a vital role in establishing identity (Djité, 2006). According to this view, individual is a socio-historical and socio-cultural product, means different and multiple identities at different points of time and settings (Gergen, 1991; Hall, Held & McGrew, 1992). The literature review addresses aspects of how does language become powerful under historical, political, educational factors and others, and how does powerful language play its role in constructing individual identities.

How Powerful Languages Construct Identities: The Pakistani Case

Historically Constructed Identities

People tend to construct their identities in powerful languages. As Kachru, is concerned about language and power are on the top of linguistics, history, sociology, attitude studies, politics and financial contemplations. Powerful language is linked with community power.

Within historical concept of identity, many researchers conclude that language is closely connected to power in Pakistan. Pakistan is linguistically diverse country i.e Multilingualism. Kachru describes multilingualism as “linguistic behavior depends on the usage of two, three or more languages according to the condition.” (Kachru 1986a: 159). English is its official language since British rule; its national language is Urdu which is the mother tongue of Mohajirs. Pakistan’s five indigenous languages included Punjabi, Sindhi, Siraiki, Pashto, Balochi and others.

English and Urdu are considered powerful languages in Multilingual setting of Pakistan. Urdu is symbol of national identity and English is the source of getting employment (Rahman 2000: 41-42), as being employee is believed to be powerful in current societies. It is observed that with powerful language users can get more fulfillments of life than the speakers of other languages. (Rahman 2002: 38-42).

Politically Constructed Identities

Rationale for giving nobility to Urdu as national language is that it is widely spread in Pakistan. Urdu speakers thought themselves more sophisticated than the indigenous speakers. On its peak, this is a symbol of creating a unified ‘Pakistani’ identity. Here it serves political purpose of resisting ethnicity. Privileging Urdu as national language has created ethnic opposition. Major results were movements against Urdu based on racial movements in Pakistan' short history. [Rahman, 1996]. Bangladesh creation and division of Pakistan was the result of Bengali Language Movement of 1948-52 in East Pakistan. Urdu was also opposed in Sindh due to language movements in January 1971 and July 1972 (Ahmed 1992). Even Sindh faced the problem of power. The Mohajirs remained dominant in urban areas as they did not learn Sindhi, whereas Sindhis had to learn Urdu. (Rahman 2002: Chapter 10). In short, indigenous languages are given less importance than Urdu. (Rahman 2002: 36). What happens as Bourdieu also noted; that people start to construct their identities under that language which are powerful, this language becomes a ‘cultural capital’. (1991: 230-231).

Educationally Constructed Identities

Along with the identity construction another role of language is its use in education. As Urdu is national and widespread urban language which is the medium of teaching in government schools while English being official and international language is especially taught in science and technology subjects at higher levels especially to those who seek to study science and technology. (Rahman, 1996).

In Pakistani institutes, the language which is appreciated is English, while Sindhi and Urdu do not have such educational value. The result is that people endeavor to learn English instead of Urdu or Sindhi at institutes. Shemeem Abbas has written that English has strong presence in education, which the dominant in media; it has been used as a medium for communication. There is the increasing importance of English in every domain (Abbas, 1993). According to the survey conducted by Sabiha Masroor on the Punjabi students' attitude towards languages and found that they ranked English highest, Urdu second and third other tongues, Punjabi last (Masroor, 1993).

Culturally Constructed Identities

Languages are vehicles through which cultural identities are constructed, accumulated, stored and transmitted; hence language is a mirror of culture. The identity helps in maintaining and constructing links with different cultures. Researchers discuss that in Pakistan language is the key of maintaining cultural, the cultural valued languages are Urdu and English, while other languages do not have as much cultural value. The result is English and Urdu has occupied the place of other languages in the country. Pakistani societies have developed rich cultures, which are conveyed through language. Language is therefore a central means whereby cultures are passed on to each society. Narrating the stories, fables, proverbs, idioms, sayings, riddles, songs, and verbal education are used as means of preservation in Pakistan. Bourdieu (1977) said that we have to accept certain things from society that becomes our habits those habits becomes our social experiences, we coordinate those experiences with others and it is language that help us to coordinate our experiences with others.

As a person is told that his language is inferior, means, one is giving negative illustration that their language is a disgrace for them. This makes people decline their cultural identity. In that way they started to believe to ashamed of their true cultural identity. Resultantly people start to construct their cultural identities in powerful languages.

Social Class Constructed Identities

Language may serve to perpetuate social stratification. Usually in a Pakistan, one sees a social class or caste system in which rulers belong to upper class, and working class belong to lower class. Wolff believed that “this social hierarchy is normally constructed by linguistic differences”. (2000: 306).

Incidentally, in Pakistani context, the people who have to live miserable lives are poor caste systems and less powerful. The people that have lower castes have to accept lower social status but they themselves think people lower in social scale. That’s why they start to leave their original identities and start to make their identities in the status of educated and powerful people. Therefore, ‘the number of Memons, Shaikhs, Abbasis and the other categories’—Syed, Mughal and Pathan—increased amazingly (Ahmad, R. 1981: 115). In that way different identities are constructed by rich and poor according to their parameters. For obvious reasons this relate to language-shame being embarrassed about one’s language—and hence to possible language death.

Having reviewed the presented literature on how language constructs individual identities and setting the focus of the current study, the next section begins by presenting the methodology of the study. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology employed, and a discussion of each method, the sample, the sampling procedure, and sample size. The procedure of collecting and analyzing data are discussed next.

With the support of theoretical framework, it may be drawn that individual identities are the consequences of multilingualism, and people want to make their identity in the most powerful and dominant language. These individual identities caused by unique factors, such as political, social, cultural and educational. A considerable body of research supports the theoretical perspective that language constructs individual identities due to different factors. As a result, individual identities are classified to differ across social, cultural, educational and political backgrounds. This requires the study of the understanding of individual identities based on different languages. However, researchers have given their opinion to the Pakistani socio, cultural, political and educational situations; there is a need of practical research in this regard. Therefore, this research is the motivation to conduct study on the how language construct individual identities.

Research Methodology

This section explains methodology employed to collect field data. The purpose of this study is to provide background data for future research on relationship of language and identities. This section also introduces the participant’s selection procedure. Moreover, the instruments used for data collection including the questionnaire for determining dependability of identity on which language, will be provided. In addition, the data analyses, along with the procedures made use of, will be presented.

Participants:

The following table 1 tells the process of the selection of participant for this study.

Table 1: Selected Participants of the study

S.No	Category	Languages	Gender		Status	Total Number
			Male	Female		
1	Sindhi Family	Siraiki	1		Head of the Family	04
		Sindhi		1	House wife	
		Urdu	1	1	School Students	
2	Shifted family	Pashto	1	1	Husband and Wife	02
3	University Students	English	1	1	Students	02
4	Employees	Urdu	1	1	Job	02
		Sindhi				
Total						10

Four categories (Sindhi family, KPK shifted family, University students, and employees) were made for the selection of the participants. Total ten participants were selected out of four categories for this study; participants were randomly selected from major six language speakers of Sindh; Siraiki, Sindhi, Urdu, Pashto, English and others.

The justification for such selection is based on the availability of participants in Sindh province and easy access of researcher to them. First participants were four members from Sindhi family, who speaks Sindhi and Siraiki mix at home, and Urdu and English at School (multilingual), one of the participants was father, the head of the family whose mother tongue was siraiki, the other participant was mother the housewife, whose mother tongue was sindhi, the other two were school going students who have to speak Sindhi and Siraki mix at home while they have to learn and speak Urdu and English at school. The Other respondents selected for this study were migrant family (02 members) from Khyber Pakhtunkhwan, whose mother tongue was Pashto, as they started to live in Sindh for job purpose that's why they had to speak in Urdu. Also University students (02 students) were interviewed in this study, being students of University they have to speak in English. Working female who speaks in Urdu and male who speak Sindhi (01 male and 01 female) in job were also assessed to check how language does construct their identities. The major problem for the small number of the participants was that the identity characteristics questionnaires includes some items related to the participants attitudes, beliefs and ideas which they did not feel at ease to share with the researcher. As such, the final number of participants was 10, who willingly and cooperatively took part in the study.

Instruments:

Questionnaire

Baker's (1992) modified version of the questionnaire was used in the present study. It was used with Welsh students in Wales. In this study, to avoid any confusion, along with English version of questionnaire, translation in local language was also used for those respondents who cannot understand English. Both open ended and closed ended questions were used. It was divided into two parts. Part one of the questionnaires was based on the seven points likert scale for nine items. These items asked information on which language helps to construct individual identities. Part two of the questionnaire was open ended. This part helped to understand the power of any language upon individual identities. In that part participants were asked to discuss in written form their views on given statements.

Findings and Discussion Summary

4.1. Questionnaire Findings from Part-I

Part #01 of questionnaire required participants to indicate that which language help them to construct which identity. This part is quantitative source based on a seven- column likert scale; seven languages (English, Sindhi, Siraiki, Balochi, Punjabi, Urdu and Others) were indicated for nine items. Only selected items by the participants are discussed. Comments which provided insights into the participants' perceptions were also included.

For the item regarded "To get a job", 10 (100%) participants reacted that they can get job only if they know English. English is job requirement; it is official and international language.

Respondent reported the item on "To earn money", 04 (40%) that they can earn money if they could know English, while 02 (20%) were of the opinion that Sindhi can help to earn money, on the other hand 04 (40%) countered Urdu can help them to earn money. Moreover, they elaborated that using language in earning money depends on business and situation, so one could understand and speak at least English, Urdu and Sindhi languages.

Informants on item of "To become intellectual" revealed that becoming intellectual comes with intuition, knowledge and in mother tongue but English is global language and big number of audience is available only in English throughout the world, also our curriculums in our institutes are in English, it is English that can give us good career so informants reported English 70%, Sindhi 20% and Urdu only 10% can help to be intellectual.

As for as the item "to make friends" was concerned it was Sindhi that help 70% (07 informants) and Urdu 30% (03 informants) in making friends, according to the informants we don't need any foreign or English language to make friends; however, making friends depend on sincerity not on any language and mostly we have those friends, who are our colleagues in offices or college/university mates, there we mostly need English, Urdu and Sindhi, although, we prefer to make friends in our native languages.

As for item "To understand world" 03 (30%) respondents in English, 05 (50%) in Sindhi, only 01 (10%) in Urdu, participants said everyone can understand world in his/her own mother tongue, but as material and access to world knowledge is available in English on net or in shape of books so after mother tongue, English helps you to understand world more.

For item “To pass exams” 04 (40%) accounted English can help to pass exams, 03 (30%) Urdu and 03 (30%) Sindhi. However, the option ‘To talk to friends/teachers in Institutes’ informants described, 04 (40%) said we talk with friends/teachers inside institutes in English, 03 (30%) in Urdu and 03 (30%) in Sindhi. Whereas, the option ‘To talk to friends/teachers outside Institutes’, only 10% (01 informant) told in English, 30% (03 informants) in Sindhi, while Urdu was reported 60% (06 informant). They said that English is formal language it can only be used inside institutes, also, as it is not our mother tongue so we don’t feel comfortable to express ourselves in English. They further added that communication depends on the language of person we talk, we first communicate in Urdu or Sindhi. The item “To be successful in life”, participants briefly answered that 60% (06 informants) depends on English as it has demand and scope, while only 20% (02 informants) success depends on Sindhi, and 20% (02 informants) on Urdu.

4.2 Checklist Statements from Part-II:

Part #02 of the questionnaire is qualitative source which is checklist of nine statements, this part helped to understand the power of any language upon individual identities. Researcher prepared nine statements on which discussion was held including 1) I like English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language, 2) I prefer to watch TV and like to read books, news papers and magazines in English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language, 3) It's a waste of time to learn English, because -----, 4) There are more useful languages to learn than English, why? -----, 5) Which language has no place in the modern world?, 6) Our children should be made to learn English/Urdu/Sindhi/other, 7) Speaking English/Urdu/Sindhi/other helps one get a job, 8) It will cause problems if only one language is taught at our institutes, 9) For me, English/Urdu/Sindhi/other should be our national language. Only discussed statements by the participants are discussed.

On the statement “I like English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language”, it came into notice that all languages are equally important, and have place in their regions, so we cannot deny position of any language in world, however, languages died because of its unscripted nature.

Responding to the statement “I prefer to watch TV and like to read books, news papers and magazines in English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language” respondents stated that preference of watching TV, and reading books, news papers and magazines is given to Urdu, sometimes in English. Further, responding to same statement they stated that it was conversed that Sindhi channels are not given preference, reason they told is that channels are not showing true picture of Sindhi culture, that it is not our Sindhi culture to shout and having guns and axes in hands all the time or girls are dancing in western style, even Sindhi dresses are also not according to Sindhi culture.

Informants conferred on the statement “There are more useful languages to learn than English, why?” that there is no harm to learn new language; it cannot change our identity, knowing other language will add more understanding in accepting world. It will broaden window of knowledge through which we can see more precisely and with the lenses of the world languages. According to response on the statemts “It's a waste of time to learn English, because ----”, that learning English is not waste of time, because it help us to get jobs, and to go hand in hand with world, so we wish our children could learn English along with Urdu and Sindhi in their institutes, besides we should learn other language, as there are more useful languages to learn as Arabic, because it will help us to understand Holy Quran’s message.

Conclusion

All languages in the world have equal importance and value. They represent respective groups in all parts of the world. No language is superior to other. All languages represent their social group. All languages should be respected and valued. Indigenous languages carry the cultural load of Pakistan and its history of thousand years and represent Pakistan and its regions. It is a prime duty of the state and all citizens of the country to preserve, value, and promote indigenous languages in the country along with national and foreign languages. As for as Urdu language is concerned, it should continue to remain our national language as it is our identity and widely spoken language of the country, everyone can easily communicate in Urdu than in any other language, Urdu is easy to learn because of its simple and easy structure, one can easily learn Urdu, while, other languages like Sindhi, Arabic, Siraiki, Punjabi or Pashto are difficult to learn.

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APPENDIX**QUESTIONNAIRE****Part # 1**

This part will help to understand that which language help to construct individual identities? Note that the figures outside the parentheses are number of participants those were interviewed and figures in parentheses are the percentages.

Research Question # 1: Which language helps you what?

S.No	Identities	English	Sindhi	Siraiki	Balochi	Punjabi	Urdu	Others
	To get a job	10 (100%)	--	--	--	--	--	--
	To earn money	04 (40%)	02 (20%)	--	--	--	04 (40%)	--
	To become intellectual	07 (70%)	02 (20%)	--	--	--	01 (10%)	--
	To make friends	--	07 (70%)	--	--	--	03 (30%)	--
	To understand world	03 (30%)	05 (50%)	--	--	--	01 (10%)	--
	To pass exams	04 (40%)	03 (30%)	--	--	--	03 (30%)	--
	To talk to friends/teachers in Institutes	04 (40%)	03 (30%)	--	--	--	03 (30%)	--
	To talk to people outside of Institutes	01 (10%)	03 (30%)	--	--	--	06 (60%)	--
	To be successful in life	06 (60%)	02 (20%)	--	--	--	02 (20%)	--

Part#2

Here are some statements about the languages. This part will help to understand the power of any language upon individual identities.

Research Question # 2: Please discuss on the following statements.

S.No	Statements
1.	I like English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language.
2.	I prefer to watch TV and like to read books, news papers and magazines in English/Urdu/Sindhi/other language.
3.	It's a waste of time to learn English, because -----
4.	There are more useful languages to learn than English, why? -----
5.	Which language has no place in the modern world?
6.	Our children should be made to learn English/Urdu/Sindhi/other.
7.	Speaking English/Urdu/Sindhi/other helps one get a job.
8.	It will cause problems if only one language is taught at our institutes.
9.	For me, English/Urdu/Sindhi/other should be our national language.