

How Language Contributes to Ethnic Identity: Insights from a Socio-cultural Framework

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ABSTRACT

Language is an essential component of human identity. In fact, it plays such a pivotal role in shaping human identity that many branches of humanities use it as the main instrument to study the human being and the human condition. This paper aims to show the impact of language particularly in contributing to the establishment of the ethnic identity of an individual or a group and in their historical survival. First, the article discusses how language is used to define ethnicity and how it is used to trace the origin of its present-day speakers. Then some linguistic examples, such as codeswitching and language revival, are analysed in depth to better describe the intimate relationship between language and ethnic identity. This relationship, as the analysis suggests, can be seen as a *symbiosis* where each is beneficial to the other, and ultimately, they both are crucial for the individual and the group.

Keywords: Codeswitching, dead language, ethnic identity, language revival.

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1. INTRODUCTION

History has repeatedly demonstrated that a very strong relationship exists between ethnicity and the native language of an individual or group (Anthony, 2007; Larson *et al.*, 2010). They are two elements that support and enhance each other, and together immensely contribute to the person's feeling of belonging. It is only natural that someone who claims to belong to a certain people should prove that by incorporating in his/her ways of thinking, talking and acting some characteristics which are predominantly manifested in the ways of thinking, talking and acting of the targeted people. Such traits are usually prominent in customs and traditions, in culture and in the common language that connects the members of the same people (Olander, 2022; Rizova & Stone, 2021). Therefore, language is crucial for equipping the individual with the necessary ability to relate to the ethnic group to which he or she belongs. But to what extent can language influence this ability? In other words, is it true that losing language can result in losing one's ethnic identity? The following paragraphs attempt to answer these questions.

2. ETHNICITY

Since the present paper is about the close relationship between language and ethnicity, it becomes self-evident that a proper definition of "ethnicity" must be provided at the onset of this discussion. However, this term lends itself to several definitions based on the branch of knowledge that investigates it, and consequently, defining it may prove more complex than expected.

In anthropology, an ethnic group can be seen as a group that: 1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating; 2. shares fundamental culture values, realized in overt unity in cultural norms; 3. makes up a field of communication and interaction; 4. has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category of distinguishable from other categories of the same order (Barth, 1969, as cited in Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 207). This definition, however, has two main shortcomings; first, it does not refer to an appropriate placement of an ethnic group in human society and culture more broadly; second, it echoes the notion that "boundary maintenance



is unproblematic and follows from the isolation which the itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity” (Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 208).

Among others, the above anthropological definition designates language as one of the main pillars on which an ethnic group is formed. Indeed, the field of communication and interaction mentioned here cannot emerge as a clearly identifiable element of an ethnic group without language because it is precisely language, be it spoken or written, that facilitates proper communication and interaction. To further illustrate the cruciality of this point, Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) conducted a survey where 51 British students and 21 non-British students were asked to describe their class-mates ethnic background. The research aimed to discover what criteria the students would use to distinguish between the different ethnic group that they could recognize. The result showed that language was used by 18 students as the main factor in differentiating between the diverse ethnic groups around them. Hence, language remains vital to the construct of ethnicity.

In cultural studies, ethnicity, among other elements, is closely linked to identity, which according to Hall (1996) should be seen as a process, namely ‘identification’, rather than a complete stand-alone construct. He suggests that individuals see themselves as belonging to a group, often through shared experiences of historical, cultural, or political significance, and argues that ethnicity is tied to how individuals negotiate their identities within specific cultural contexts. Indeed, how such negotiations are executed is heavily influenced by the choice of language which in turn is influenced by the goals and interests of a certain group at a certain cultural and political context.

It is essential here that a distinction is made between of concepts of *ethnicity* and *race*, because although they can be used interchangeably in everyday discourse, they are fundamentally different in the academic context. Ethnicity is usually classified in terms of cultural, linguistic and historical traits while race is categorized based on physical traits and appearance. In addition, ethnicity is usually more fluid and flexible, but race is generally perceived as more rigid and imposed by outside factors (see Jenkins, 2008, 2014; West, 1993). In short, race is a term which predominantly refers to biological distinctions, but its misuse among various classes of human society has made it a direct synonym of ethnicity.

3. LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

From experience – as living for more than twenty-five years in a foreign country where my own ethnicity is almost unknown – it has become obvious to me that after introducing myself and my country of origin, namely Albania, I must answer the frequently asked question “What language do you speak in Albania?”. This evident tendency of asking about the language spoken by a certain people clearly indicates that language is the main factor in establishing a connection between an individual and their respective ethnic group. Therefore, if the answer to the above question would have been “We speak Greek in Albania”, the person asking would have most likely concluded that I belong to the Greek ethnicity, which of course is inaccurate.

Historical linguistics and comparative linguistics are two fields which are used to retrace the origin of a certain language and compare it to present-day languages and evaluate whether they are related or not. If two languages show significant similarities in certain linguistic areas such as morphology and phonology, the most recent one is said to descent from the most ancient one. For instance, ancient Greek is very similar to Sumerian, which is a dead language, and Latin is related to Hittite, which is another dead language. “All these languages are transmitted by historical records,” which allow us to apply to them the historical linguistics methods adequately and understand the extent of their relationship (Anttila, 1989, p. 23).

In the event of a complete match between the two compared languages, it is safe to conclude that the people who use or used them share a mutual ancestry and are therefore closely related ethnically. It looks as if this claim holds true, but actually it cannot be absolutely true if it is not supported by more evidence, which is mainly derived from history and anthropology. For instance, history can provide us with information about the occurrence of mass migration, which can ultimately lead to language shift. Hence, in light of such historical realizations, which only emerge after thorough research, it becomes possible to exclude other potential factors that can cause language shift, such migration or invasion.

The impact of historical linguistics as well as comparative linguistics on bridging the gap between languages and ethnic groups can be best illustrated by the seminal work of the prominent philosopher and linguist William Jones. By relying on his expertise in these two fields, Jones established a connection between European and Indian languages, hence the Indo-European languages family (Campbell & Poser, 2008). This linguistic relationship also entails that there must be an ethnic connection between the two groups of people, but historical mass migration must have led to the diffusion of this ancient ethnicity, and over the years new and separately identifiable ethnicities have emerged.

Further, [D'Angely \(1998\)](#) also relied on language and genetics as well as other social, cultural and historical facts to prove that Albanian language is a close relative of Pellazgian, which used to be the “universal language of the ancient white man world and the Byzantine Empire” (p. 221). As a consequence, he states that all ethnic-groups who inhabited the regions of “Asia Minor, Trachea, Macedonia, Epiri/Ipirus, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and southern France (Arvenes = Arbën = Albanë) even though called Greeks or Hellens were also Albanian speakers, therefore Albanian” ([D'Angely, 1998](#), p. 223).

4. ASPECTS OF ETHNICITY MANIFESTED IN LANGUAGE

After surveying a few historical examples that clearly illustrate the robust relationship between ethnic identity and language, the discussion continues with a more detailed examination of how ethnic identity can play a major role in reviving a language at different levels. Additionally, the opposite will also be discussed, namely how language can enhance the feeling of ethnic belonging and ethnically motivated activities respectively.

4.1. *Ethnicity and Dead Languages*

Dead languages or extinct languages are those languages that are no more spoken because their native speakers either shifted to another language, or they all died, and the language died with them ([Hagège & Gladding, 2009](#)). In Europe, many regional or minority languages have been revived to such an extent that in some cases they have gained the status of official languages. This noticeable trend has mainly emerged because of some rather influential human rights and nationalistic movements or because of a growing sense of authenticity and legitimacy of the new speakers ([Urla & Ramallo, 2022](#)).

Albanian language, which has become one of the official languages of North Macedonia, provides a very recent example of such trend. The government of North Macedonia recognized Albanian as the second official language in the country in the beginning of the third millennium, and recognized the Albanian ethnic-group, which constitute around one third of the population, the right to pursuing higher education in their mother tongue. In this case, the influence of ethnic identity on maintaining the language was so impactful that it drove the Albanians living in North Macedonia to war. One of the main demands of Albanians was the use of their language in official institutions as well as the recognition of Albanian universities ([Iseni, 2013](#)).

Hebrew, on the other hand, is perhaps the best example to show how far the influence of ethnicity on language can go. Hebrew was an extinct language for a long time, but it was revived during the last century in the newly established state of Israel. The government there was set to choose a language that should project a strong unity among Jews immigrating massively and continuously from different regions of the globe. There were two real candidates to take that role. The first was Yiddish, which is a nonterritorial Germanic language written with the Hebrew alphabet and used among many Jews in Eastern and Central European countries; the second was Hebrew, which at the time was still a dead language found only in historical records ([Waterman, 2018](#)).

Hebrew emerged victorious over Yiddish for two main reasons. The first reason pertained to the fact that Jewish identity is strongly associated with religion and Hebrew is their holy language in which Jews perform their rituals. The second reason was related to massive immigration of Jews from Arab countries in 1948. Yiddish was a strange language to them whereas Hebrew was more familiar because they already used a Semitic language, namely Arabic, which bore many striking similarities to Hebrew. Indeed, the official decision was made shortly after the occurrence of that massive influx of Jews who were arriving from Arabic speaking countries ([Safran, 2005](#)).

4.2. *Ethnicity and Codeswitching*

Ethnic identity very often can be a dilemma for bilinguals. Their ability to speak two different languages with masterful fluency can position them in a situation where they would be forced to choose one of the two to convey a certain message, which sometimes can carry ethnic tones. However, it is commonly observed that people tend to codeswitch in different situations and for various reasons. Religion is a well-known factor that leads to codeswitching. Muslims from all over the world, for instance, switch to Arabic when they conduct their pilgrimage to Mecca, while Catholics use Latin in their Sunday congregations and Jews use Hebrew for their rituals. In addition, learners of a foreign language can codeswitch to their mother tongue when they feel overwhelmed by anxiety, which arises from the insecurity of communication in the foreign language, or when they need to establish a proper environment for safe interaction with other language learners in the same situation ([Al Farhan & Beqiri, 2024](#)).

A famous case for expressing ethnic identity by means of codeswitching is the case of the 19th century Spanish poet Rosalia de Castro. According to [Courteau \(1991\)](#), “Rosalia tried to define Gallegan

culture identity within a metapoetic context, transmitted by means of a specific semiotic code in the dominant language” (p. 83). In short, she incorporated in her poetic lines some unique features which were exclusively related to her native language and culture.

Gallegan is a Romance dialect spoken in the region of Galicia in the Northwest of Spain and its use identifies with that region’s specific customs and traditions. At Rosalia’s time, the dialect and other specific features of Gallegan identity were at risk of extinction. The poet was aware of that and sought to keep Gallegan identity alive and help it prosper by codifying its culture and identity in Castilian, which was the dominant written language. Some of the cultural elements that she embedded in her work by means of Gallegan linguistic elements were “the oaks, which epitomize Gallegan tradition, and when they are destroyed by the axe of progress, all of Gallegan culture is threatened” (Courteau, 1991, p. 93). In brief, Rosalia was successful in employing codeswitching between her mother tongue and the dominant Castilian language as a means for keeping her people’s ethnic identity alive—which was barely surviving through other cultural and social practices.

Codeswitching, according to Myers-Scotton (1991), can be strategically adopted by people living in a multi-ethnic community for sending communicative signals of ethnic-identification because of six main reasons. Among the six, “exclusive” marked choices occur when the speaker uses his/her own ethnic language to interact with ethnic brethren in front of other co-participants who belong to other ethnic groups. Apparently, codeswitching in this context serves the purpose of decreasing social distance with the members of the same ethnicity, while increasing that distance with the rest.

This can be easily observed even among the members of the same ethnic group who speak more than one dialect, such as in the case of my people, Albanians. There are two main variations of Albanian language that are geographically distributed between the northern areas of the country and the southern ones; Albanian northerners speak the Gegë dialect while the southerners speak Toskë. It is noticed that when members of these two regions happen to mix and mingle in the capital city, they try to use standard Albanian. However, this principle is generally broken in situations where they want to close the social distance with other members of their region while widening it with others, and consequently, they make sure to switch to their regional dialect and let everyone in the gathering hear that loud and clear.

One instance of exclusive marked codeswitching comes from the most southern region of Albania, called Çamëria, which was ethnically cleansed by the Greeks at the end of WW2, and their inhabitants found refuge in other regions of the country. As a descendant of this sub-ethnic group of Albanians, I have noticed the codeswitching that usually happens in my home when other members of the same group visit us, be them close relatives or just friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, as time passes and generations change it appears that we are losing our dialect and further shifting to standard Albanian in all our everyday communication and interactions.

4.3. Ethnicity and Endangered Languages

An endangered language can be defined in many ways, but a definition that serves the scope of this paper is that “... it is not a language itself that is endangered, but rather it is the continued use of the language that is under threat, and this can be due to various social, political, and other non-linguistic reasons.” (Rogers & Campbell, 2015, p. 2). It is fundamental that we pause and think about the *non-linguistic reasons* that lead to the extinction of a language. While it may look as if it is stating the obvious, it is essential that we reinforce the idea that all languages are self-sufficient, and they can continue to exist as they have existed for so long if their users are not coerced—be it directly or indirectly—to shift. Ethnic identity is one of the social factors that can play a major role in the continuation or discontinuation of a language. The stronger the feeling of ethnic belonging and ethnic pride is, the stronger the need for the continuation of the ethnic language will be, and vice-versa.

Nowadays the number of endangered languages is increasing at an alarming rate, and the global academic community has already acknowledged this phenomenon as a crisis (Crawford, 1995). It is true that languages extinction is not a modern trend, and we can think of Sumerian and Etruscan to illustrate that, but the speed in which the extinction of languages is happening today has never happened in the past. Michael Krauss, a well-known advocate for the preservation of language diversity, estimated that “at the rate things are going, the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages” (Krauss, 1992, p. 7).

Crawford (1995) argues that language extinction is caused by a combination of internal and external factors. Some of the external factors are cultural dominance and military conquests such as the Spanish invasion of Latin America that led to the spread of the Spanish language in the American continent. The first casualties of that invasion were the languages spoken by the Arawak peoples of the Caribbean who in fact were exterminated by Spanish army when Columbus first landed on their shore. Some of the internal factors include the impoverishment of the language itself to a degree that it cannot continue to exist as an efficient communicational tool (Sasse, 1992). This claim, however,

seems counterintuitive because unless there is a replacement to the existing language that can effectively fulfil the communicational purposes of a group of people, the language will only continue grow and expand to accommodate for every communicative need that may arise. A more plausible interpretation of language impoverishment would be to see it “a result of the language death process and not the cause” (Crawford, 1995, p. 14).

Joshua Fishman (1991), who is a main proponent of language maintenance, claimed in one of his most quoted statements that “the destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity” (p. 4). In other words, to maintain a language means to maintain the identity closely related with that language and everything that accompanies that identity ethnically, culturally and socially. In contrast, to allow a language to die means to allow that identity to disappear, and with the disappearance of a language and its respective identity, human society loses some of its richness and diversity. Crawford (1995) echoes this notion and calls for practical efforts in reviving endangered languages. While he addresses the situation of the indigenous American languages particularly, his ideas of local initiatives and governmental policies can be considered worldwide. Among the various scientific, social or political reasons that make his initiative worthy, he notably emphasises the fact that language holds a uniquely important place for the native speakers themselves. This point is best illustrated by the words of a linguist who worked on a project of reviving an endangered Australian Aboriginal language who said:

It was not the success in reviving the language—although in some small ways [the program] did that. It was success in reviving something far deeper than the language itself—that sense of worth in being Adnyamathanha, and in having something unique and infinitely worth hanging onto. (D. Tunbridge, 1988, as quoted in Schmidt, 1990, p. 106)

The linguist, who is apparently a native speaker of Adnyamathanha, has experienced the project of reviving his mother tongue among the rest of this ethnic group members in a special way. It is this strong feeling of belonging and perceiving the surrounding world from the perspective that is uniquely accessible by means of one’s mother tongue that make language maintenance fundamental.

5. LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY REVIVAL

Language maintenance has been at the centre of ethnic identity preservation, but simultaneously it has suffered serious attacks by invading powers. Such attacks have usually served the main objective of the invasion, which often aims to exert full control on the newly annexed territories by assimilating the native inhabitants into their cultural and ethnic identity. And the surest and maybe shortest way to achieve that has been suppressing the use of the native languages. To further illustrate, two cases are discussed in the following sections, namely the case of the Kurdish language in Turkey and the Catalan language in Barcelona, Spain.

5.1. *Kurdish, When Language is a Crime*

Perhaps putting forth this example as an illustration of the undeniably strong relationship between language and ethnic identity will be perceived as too much by some, nevertheless, it remains a piece of evidence that is difficult to refute. Kurds are considered the largest ethnic group that have no country or state of their own. In fact, they are distributed in different countries of the Middle East such as Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. In all these countries, they experience similar challenges to those experienced by most minority groups around the world such as discrimination and social, economic and political marginalization (UNHCR, 2024).

In Turkey, however, these hardships have grown to a bigger magnitude. Kurds there are the largest minority group and are seen as a credible threat to the stability and unity of the state. They indeed have formed separatist movements, with some arming themselves and executing armed incursions and armed attacks inside the country. Many have claimed that the situation has escalated in Turkey to this extent because of religious and socio-economic inequality and underdevelopment (Sarigil, 2010; White, 1998), but Somer (2022) maintains that the main reason underlining the severity of the conflict is the lack of understanding of this ethnic clash between the Turks and the Kurds. In fact, “the Kurds in Turkey never accepted the imposition of a Turkic ethnic identity upon them and have on the contrary always sought the official recognition of their own separate identity” (Mohammed & Romano, 2023, p. 2).

In addition to military operations against Kurdish rebels, the Turkish state has adopted several assimilating strategies to facilitate the melting of the Kurdish ethnic identity into the Turkish one. One of the main strategies to achieve this goal has been repressing the Kurdish language and enforcing the

Turkish language on the Kurdish population. Some manifestations of such repression have come in the form of banning the use of Kurdish language in public or in official broadcasts and forbidding the use of Kurdish names for newborns (Sherwani & Barlik, 2020). However, these actions have been usually met with rejection and resistance and most Kurds have retained their mother tongue and their ethnic identity throughout this long conflict.

Although the Kurdish situation seems to have improved in recent years, the threat to their language and their ethnicity remains as true as ever. In fact, O'Driscoll (2014) goes as far as to describe the condition of the Kurdish language under the Turkish law as being under the threat of eradication because of "linguicide" politics. Further, in a large-scale study, Zeyneloğlu *et al.* (2024) claim that many of the Kurds in Turkey have become bilinguals, and this might cause concerns for the future of the language. Since the Kurdish case has not settled on a final resolution yet, further research and investigation must be regularly conducted to learn about any changes that may occur there.

5.2. Catalan, A Success Story

In the case of Catalan, the situation could not be more different. It is true that under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco many ethnic groups suffered severe repression and subjugation, but as that brutal regime ended, the situation improved.

Immediately after rising to power, Franco passed several laws to centralize and consolidate his grip over the country, and to prevent any revolutions or rebellions against him. Amongst the policies he followed, he ensured that languages other than Castilian were banished, and some of those languages included Euskera, spoken in the Basque region, Catalan, spoken in Catalonia, and Gallegan, spoken in Galicia (Casademont, 2020; Pujolar & Puigdevall, 2015). All ethnic groups who were affected by such unfair laws resisted the suppression, but Catalan was the only one to eventually rise as a *high variety language*. In short, the Catalan language and ethnicity not only survived the brutal reprisals of the Franco regime, but they also emerged stronger and more influential than ever. Indeed, Catalan has already begun to be used in public forums, and formal domains, and has developed a standardized written form (Anguera & Manegre, 2024).

Woolard (2018) argues that Catalan endured over forty years of intense suppression because it was essential in defining a prestigious ethnic identity connected to high status. Undoubtedly, this case epitomizes the important role that ethnic identity plays in maintaining the native language of the group. If Catalans had had no interest in identifying themselves as such, they could have very well quit speaking Catalan, and would have shifted to Castilian, which in recompense would have provided them with many privileges such as extra freedom and extra opportunities for a better life. Instead, they chose to bear the severe persecution of Franco's dictatorship but preserve their language, which meant at the same time preserve their proud ethnic identity alive.

Nowadays Catalan has gained considerable ground in the educational and political spheres in Spain and is aiming to become an official language, or even more, to become the foundation for a new European nation. However, this goal comes with a high price as it can weaken the high ethnic value that Catalan held during Franco's era. In fact, this decline of ethnic significance was already observed during the 1980s, when the use of Catalan was no more the key element to identifying Catalans from non-Catalans (Woolard, 1991). Yet, if Catalans achieve their goal and eventually establish an independent state recognized as a member of the EU, the question of language and ethnic identity would have no reason to be raised again. The existence of a state would secure sufficient resources and power to maintain and develop the language as it fits their political and social purposes.

6. CONCLUSION

The self-esteem of any individual is essentially reliant on personal characteristics and abilities. In addition, social, economic and religious factors play a great role in boosting and enhancing self-esteem, and the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group that enjoys high status and prestige can solidify that. On the other hand, if the feeling of belonging grows weaker, or the individual shifts to a less prestigious ethnic group, self-esteem will also suffer and ultimately life quality may deteriorate.

Language is the main factor on which human societies have usually tried to increase their self-esteem, which sometimes can even evolve to a sense of superiority and dominance. It is in fact considered a key element to identify certain individuals or groups and distinguish them from others. Language has provided scholars of ethnic studies with profound insights in their field of expertise, as well as being a crucial instrument in the hands of historians and linguists when investigating the life of ancient people and cultures and relate them to present-day ones.

Moreover, ethnic identification can exert an immense influence on language as well. It can go as far as planning and implementing the revival of an extinct language, such as in the case of Hebrew, or it can motivate bilinguals to codeswitch regularly. Perhaps, the most obvious examples that expose the

strong link that exists between language and ethnic identity come appear when language oppression or even linguicide is involved, as was the case with Catalan in Spain and with Kurdish in Turkey. In such situations, maintaining one's language means securing the survival of one's ethnic identity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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