The Internalization of Ethnotheories through Language: An Inquiry into the Sensitivity of Caregivers in the Socialization of Bilingual Children

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There has been research by linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists alike on the mechanisms of language acquisition and the relationship of thought, language, and culture. While the degree to which language shapes thought and thought shapes language is still debated, there is support that language and thought influence each other and that both play a role in conveying and enforcing a culture's ethnotheories - its commonly held attitudes, values and beliefs. When children learn two languages they are influenced by differing and sometimes contradictory ethnotheories. Caregivers of bilingual children need to become more sensitive to the relationship between language, culture and thought in order that they may gain a greater awareness of the influence their language has on children's socialization.

I Theoretical Perspectives

There are numerable theories on language acquisition and its relation to thought. The two major differences in rationale appear in the biological importance of language and the dependence of thought on language. Some theorists believe the ability to acquire language is innate for humans and some believe it to be a product of society. Some theorists hypothesize that children must be able to think before they can speak, some that children speak before they can think, and others that language is a social tool to enhance thought but not a dependant function of the mind.

Benjamin Lee Whorf

The Theory of Linguistic Relativism, which states that languages differ in how they carve out segments of reality or that "different languages divide up reality in different ways" (Whorf, 1956) was popularized by Whorf. His theory of Linguistic Determinism states that language determines the shape of thought:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages... the world
> is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized

by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic symbolism from which other symbolisms take their cue (ibid.)

The two theories of Linguistic Relativism and Linguistic Determinism combined to form the Whorfian Hypothesis, often called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. It states: "speakers of different languages have different patterns of thought." (ibid.) What has come to be known a the Strong Whorfian Position implies that one's native language determines one's thought, whereas the Weak Whorfian Position suggest a tendency for speakers to behave along the lines defined by language.

Whorf claims that there are lexical differences in language. One famous example to which he refers is the Hopi Indians' numerous words for different kinds of snow, for which there is only the single word in English (ibid.) This difference would ensure that the Hopi children learn from an early age to take more notice and cognitively distinguish the kind of snow in their physical environment than would English speakers.

Whorf also discusses the lack of verb tense in some languages and thus suggests the expression of time plays less importance in some languages than in others. Since the publication of the Wharfian Hypothesis at the beginning of the last century there have been many inquiries into the relationship between language and culture.

Lera Boroditsky

The recent cultural study of Mandarin and English speakers by Boroditsky, following in the Whorfian tradition, makes a strong case for language shaping habitual thought. She purports language as a powerful tool in shaping thought about abstract domains and that one's native language plays an important role in shaping habitual thought. (Boroditsky, 2001). The study examined whether different ways of talking about time lead to different ways of thinking about it. Both Mandarin and English speakers use horizontal terms to talk about time. In addition, Mandarin speakers generally use the vertical terms. Do the differences between the English and Mandarin ways of talking about time lead to differences in how their speakers think about time? Both use their spatial knowledge to think about time. If Mandarin speakers do show a vertical bias in thinking about time even when they are thinking in English, then language must play an important role in shaping speakers' thinking. 'Language-encouraged habits' in thought can operate regardless of the language in which one is currently thinking. (ibid.). The outcome of Boroditsky's study suggests that experience with a language can shape the way one thinks. Learning a new way to talk about a familiar subject can change the way one thinks about that subject.

Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker

Chomsky is perhaps one of the most influential linguists of our time and a harsh critique of Whorf's understanding of the relationship of language to thought and culture. He emphasizes the independence of language and thought maintaining his passionate belief that language acquisition is innate. His metaphor is of language as an organ of the mind, autonomous from the rest of cognition. All humans are born with the hardware, which forms language universals, or 'mentalese'. The acquisition and structures of language are a biological function of the brain needing only slight social stimulation to mature.

Chomsky examined what he called the creative aspect of language - the ability to make up new words and to say and understand new things. Because children do not merely mimic their caregivers in their language structures, Chomsky believes this gives freedom to the individual as a communicator.

The research of Pinker, the director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is deeply influenced by Chomsky. He, too, believes language acquisition is instinctive. "Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains." (Pinker, 1994)

Jean Piaget

The child psychologist Piaget believed that language is not an important cause in the development of knowledge and that language primarily reflects thought and does not shape it. (Piaget, 1955) The transmission of information through language was not, of itself, sufficient to give the child a true understanding of his physical environment. It is the child's cognitive development that allows the child to understand his physical world. The development of formal logic has its roots in the sensorimotor stage which occurs at around 18 months of age; children's knowledge consists of a motor representation -- they are aware that an object covered by a shield is still present. The ability to abstractly understand one's environment, according to Piaget, is the general form of knowledge and the source of all domains of cognition, including language.

L. S. Vygotsky

Whether language is a natural ability occurring with children's cognitive development, as Piaget asserts, is of less importance to the child psychologist Vygotsky, who held the view that language is an important tool through which society conveys its knowledge and values to the child. Like Chomsky, Vygotsky contends that language and thought were independent functions of the brain but that language provides the medium through which adults socialize children into

their way of thinking. All learning is social. "Speech acts to organize, unify, and integrate many disparate aspects of children's behaviors, such as perception, memory and problem solving." (Vygotsky, 1962)

Vygotsky sees the relation between the individual and the society as a 'dialectical process'. He asserts that when social speech -- speech used towards others -- is turned inward (becomes egocentric speech) language takes on an interpersonal function in addition to its intrapersonal function and thus becomes an effective problem-solving tool. During a child's development, speech guides the course of action. "Just as a mold gives shape to a substance, words can shape an activity into a structure." (ibid.) Unlike Piaget who believed external reality focused around the physical world, Vygotsky believed that the external reality is preeminently cultural,

Elinor Ochs

Whereas Vygotsky was primarily concerned with the child's development and saw language as a tool to aid it, Elinor Ochs is a linguist whose primary concern is the way in which language aids the internalization of societal values. "Through the process of socialization, individuals internalize the values of society, including those relating to personality and role behavior." (Ochs, 1986) She asserts that individuals do not automatically internalize how others see and treat them because individuals are active agents in their own socialization. However, children acquire "principals of social order and systems of belief (ethnotheories) through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interaction... Sociocultural information is generally encoded in the organization of conversational discourse... Many formal and functional features of discourse carry sociocultural information." (ibid.) These features of language are culturally arranged and thus express a culture's ethnotheories -- communally held thoughts and theories about the world. "Language in use is then a major, if not the major, tool for conveying sociocultural knowledge and a powerful medium of socialization." (ibid.)

II Language as a tool in Socializing Children

Certainly there are numerous ways in which caregivers consciously or otherwise transmit ethnotheories or socialize their children. A few examples are the behavior caregivers exhibit in the home (praying before meals, habits of hygiene, pastime activities such as reading or watching television). The social interactions in which caregivers engage with others are observed and often imitated by children. When parents are polite and courteous to others, or actively involved in their children's extracurricular school activities, for example, they transmit ethnotheories. The cultural tools caregivers provide for their children, such as

books, toys, and television programs, also convey strong messages. Although language is not always the primary component of the learners' socialization, these all usually involve language. Thus a greater sensitivity or awareness on the part of caregivers as transmitters of their culture's ethnotheories is important.

The primary concern of caregivers, states Ochs, is to "ensure that their children are able to display and understand behavior appropriate to social situations. One of the major means by which this is accomplished is through language." (ibid) The social institutions in any culture try to indoctrinate children so that they become useful members of their society and can act according to its socially accepted modes of behavior. Most parents and caregivers want their child to 'fit in' to society. As educators, not just the grammatical structure of sentences, but the ability for students to use those sentences to maintain relationships within a social group (communicative competence) is important.

A number of interesting observations would be valid in the study of the role language plays in children's internalization of ethnotheories. For example, one could study common idiomatic expressions, nursery rhymes, fairy tales and other children's literature. The role television programs (varying from educational shows to shows in which violence is depicted) and the media has on influencing children's behavior is an often-debated topic. Also the way in which primary caregivers interact with children when they 'teach' them language such as the use of 'motherese' -- when caregivers use shorter sentences, simple or abbreviated wards and sometimes unnatural stress words is also an intriguing aspect of children's enculturation. The way languages are taught in schools and the differing skills and pedagogies that are employed, such as memorization or rote work compared with the whole-language approach as well as various aspects of the written language could also be studied in relation to the messages that are transmitted and the behavioral reactions of its learners.

Sensitivity for Bilingual Children

These are some of the ways in which cultural values and attitudes are transmitted to monolingual learners. Socialization becomes more complicated and multi-faceted when the learners are bilingual and thus receive their social clues in two languages. "Bilingualism is an optional or obligatory means for efficient two-way communication between two or more different 'worlds' using two different linguistic systems." (Harding, 1998) There are many different kinds of bilinguals and many situations in which and by which children learn language. Bilingual children learn their two languages from a variety of persons including: one or both parents, the extended family or from within a dominant culture, and the institutions it provides, most profoundly, schools. They may learn their two languages from different sources.

Some people learn a second language early or later in life for various social, economic, and political reasons. Some learn it for academic, casual social interactions, or business purposes. Some children learn a second language within or from outside of the culture to which the language belongs. These and sometimes more factors all influence the kind of language styles internalized the learners' development of attitudes toward both languages and learners' acquisition of not only language but also ethnotheories.

Three relatively clear and uncontested stages of early bilingual development have emerged. (Elliot,1981) The first sage is called 'mixed speech' and occurs until around the age of two. It is characterized by the juxtaposition of both languages within a single utterance or the combination of stems from one language with affixes from the other. Children then begin to differentiate between the two language systems, first at the lexical level and then with syntax in the second stage of development.

The third stage is characterized by the ability of learners to translate and their awareness of two language systems. An early awareness of language is also fostered in this period as can be seen by the fact that bilingual children are aware that they speak 'English' and 'Japanese', for example, whereas many monolingual children are not aware that they are speaking one of many standardized communication systems. (Hakuta, 1985) "An important feature of bilingualism in this period is its fragility -- taken away from the bilingual environment a child soon loses the language from which he has been removed." (Elliot.1981) This illustrates the importance of environment on language development in bilingual children.

III Language Transmits Ethnotheories

The words caregivers use and the way they use them shape the thoughts and norms of others that hear or read them. How are values communicated as a parent and teacher? How do words transmit attitudes and beliefs? How will children internalize ideas? This is an important inquiry for caregivers.

"The way language is used and understood in a particular culture, both reflects and reinforces fundamental cultural beliefs about the way people are and the nature of interpersonal communication." (Clancy,1989) The communicative style -- the rules of word usage that govern speech in appropriate social contexts of Japanese are examples as to the transmission of ethnotheories through the use of language. Doi has investigated Japanese communicative style. (1973) Here three of her examples -- *aimai* (ambiguity), *honne* versus *tatemae* (real feeling versus social norms) and *enryo* (reserve or hesitation) -- will illustrate how the communicative style of Japanese transmits ethnotheories to its listeners. These are commonly held attitudes in Japanese culture, which are often different from Western

culture and which are, at least in part, communicated through language.

Aimai or ambiguity is a trait of Japanese language that differs from English. As Doi argues, the structure of the Japanese language promotes *aimai* in various ways. One way is the fact that it is grammatically acceptable to omit reference to elements in a sentence that the speaker assumes to be understood. One common example of this is the lack of use of a subject or object in many sentences. Who did what or said what to whom is often omitted in many sentences, making it difficult to understand the story being told but lessens blame and criticism of the individuals involved.

Doi also suggests that because Japanese is a left-branching verb-final language, with negation appearing as a verb suffix, the speakers may negate a sentence at the last moment often depending upon the listener's expression. Clancy's translated example is cited to illustrate how Japanese can be nominalized and negated to make assertion less direct by western standards:

> "It isn't that we can't do it this way," one Japanese will say.
> "Of course," replies his companion, "we couldn't deny that it would be impossible to say that it couldn't be done."
> "But unless we can say that it can't be done," his friend adds, "it would be impossible not to admit that we couldn't avoid doing it." (Clancy., 1989)

Of course, directness, which is often valued in the West, is sometimes avoided in order to spare someone's feeling, even in English, but 'speaking one's mind' in Japanese is not usually an admirable behavior, which it often is in English. It would contradict the spirit of *tatemae.*

The tension between *honne* and *tatemai* is another characteristic difference between Japanese and English. *Honne* is translated as real feeling and *tatemae* as socially accepted principle. The tension between these concepts is often a greater one in Japanese than in English. In Japanese, conversation is 'a way of creating and reinforcing the emotional ties that bind people together' (ibid.) with the aim of social harmony. In order to achieve great social harmony, Japanese speakers will feel out their counterparts in order to try to recognize the general attitudes and beliefs of the conversation's participants more often than in English, according to Clancy. (ibid.) A Japanese person may have personal beliefs but will most likely fail to express them if they contradict others, for the sake of social harmony. "Reluctant to disagree with another's opinion or refuse a request, the Japanese feel pressured to give their consent, even when they actually disagree or are unable or unwilling to comply" (ibid.) Ueda discusses "sixteen ways to avoid saying 'no' in Japanese. Group harmony is an important consideration in the relatively homogenous society of Japan and is often in conflict with the

importance of the concept of individuality that is often admired in English-speaking cultures.

Enryo (reserve or hesitation) is an important part of Japanese character and helps promote harmonious social relations, sometimes at the expense of individual expression, argues Doi. *Enryo* is exhibited by the very lack of expression of ideas in Japanese compared to English. According to Clancy, verbosity has been looked down upon in Japan, as is revealed in the Japanese saying *Iwanu ga Hana* (silence is better than speech). "To give, in so many articulate words one's innermost thoughts and feelings is taken as an unmistakable sign that they are neither profound nor very sincere." (Clancy.) Japanese are more reserved or hesitant to speak but when they do they are more ambiguous and modest in order to show their reserve. As Doi describes, most Japanese expect that food should be refused three times before accepting and that the guest is actually hungry but just exhibiting proper *enryo*. The expression *kekko desu* translated into English means "I'm alright" as in when someone asks you if you would like something to drink and the guest refuses. The result of this expression would result in the host pouring the speaker a drink. It is a polite expression because it shows appropriate reserve or hesitation -- actually declining an offer. Knowing when to use words or phrases illustrates cultural and linguistic sensitivity. The same use of that expression in English would result in the speaker becoming very thirsty.

Enryo is also apparent or manifests itself in the concepts of modesty and pride. The words one uses in Japanese to describe oneself and one's performance are different than in English. A clear example of this would be a job interview. In Japan it would be considered boastful to use flattering adjectives to describe oneself and thus nondescript terms are usually used. The listener then modifies the descriptions. This modification also takes place in English when in a similar interview, the interviewer would modify the boastful adjectives used to perhaps more 'realistic' ones. Knowing what style to use in which language is an important distinction.

Sensitivity for Caregivers of Bilingual Children

The above examples of attitudes are just three that are present in Japanese that are lacking or less severe in English. How do caregivers of bilingual children try to promote reserve and hesitation in their children as would be appropriate in Japanese, while trying to promote the honest exchange of ideas and emotions admired and often required by the English language? How can caregivers encourage children to be ambiguous in Japanese while trying to be direct and to the point in English? How do we, as role models, instill the concept that group harmony is of prime importance while trying to encourage children to take pride in their individual and unique ideas while respecting others' right to articulate

their own and perhaps contradictory points of view?

Language transmits powerful messages. "The manner in which an idea or 'fact' is stated affects the way we conceptualize the ideas," says Brown. "Words shape our lives" (Brown,1980). Brown draws on the world of advertising as an example of creating images with words. When Toyota tells us to 'drive your dreams' or Nike to 'just do it!' companies are transmitting their values and attitudes to their audience in the hope that the audience will be swayed to adopt those values and, in turn, purchase the product. When a parent says, "play nicely" they are transmitting the importance that people should get along with their peers. When a caregiver says "work hard" to their children they are transmitting a strong work ethic. When an adult says to a child in Japanese 'shigata ga nai' (it can't be helped) the societal value to accept the present situation instead of trying to change it is encouraged. When a bilingual child is told both 'ganbatte' (work hard) in Japanese and 'Good Luck' in English before a test are they receiving two different ideas about how they are to behave during the test?

Does learning two languages change a learner's thoughts, values, beliefs and views of the world? Does learning two languages promote two sets of ethnotheories to be internalized by the child? Does this lessen the conviction the bilingual child has assimilating into one or either culture? Or does the transmission of a wider set of ethnotheories help create a child with a greater diversity and breadth of values and attitudes? Chaika asserts: "Once a new language is learned, it becomes available as part of a speaker's stylistic repertoire." (Chaika, 1992) Does a bilingual child have a wider repertoire from which to express his or her thoughts and ideas, to negotiate and establish desirable frames in which to participate and be able to behave according to the social conventions in which she finds herself?

To use Vygotsky's terms, 'adult guides' use 'scaffolding' techniques by which "to aid the cognitive, social, moral, affective, and spiritual development of our children". (Vygotsky, 1978) The process by which caregivers interact with children supports cognitive development, moral attitudes, and feelings. These adult-child interactions have been called 'joint involvement episodes' (JIEs). Schaffer considers them "the principal context for socialization in the early years." (Schaffer, 1996) If the joint involvement episodes are conducted in two languages is there an effect on the internalization of ethnotheories?

The Oxford Dictionary defines sensitivity as a 'responsiveness to or recording of slight changes in condition.' Thus with a greater sensitivity or awareness to these issues, caregivers may better negotiate the values, attitudes and beliefs they hope to transmit to their bilingual charges. By becoming more sensitive role models caregivers can note the internalization of their language on their children by observing changes in their outward behavior. If caregivers take the

time and breadth of thought required, they can gain greater awareness of the cultural meaning and influences behind the words and language patterns in hopes of building desirable learning environment.

IV Internalization of Ethnotheories in Discrete Ways

There might be few definitive answers to the above line of inquiry as each child internalizes their world in a different way. Despite the influence of caregivers on children there are no cause-and-effect phenomena where one stimulus will produce one result in all children. The uniqueness, diversity of personality, and genetic variations of each child all cause unpredictable and discrete results.

Together, the parent-child relationship or the teacher-student relationship continuously negotiates the cultural frames in which they live and through these continuous renegotiations and co-regulated relationships they are able to choose many of the experiences they have. (Fogel, 1993) From the systems of language communication to which learners have been exposed, they can form their own way of communicating the thoughts and feelings of the person they want to become.

Moreover, language is not fixed. "Any language can change in any way its speakers want it to, or need it to, and as soon as they wish". (Chaika, 1992) We all have the ability to make up new words, use old words in new ways, compose new sentences, and combine sentences into wholly new discourses. "Speakers can make their old language say new things." (ibid.) Languages also adopt new words from other languages to convey new values. Japanese has adopted English words such as 'freedom', 'unique', 'sexy' and 'boyfriend' to communicate new values but that also have different nuance from the true English meanings of those words.

Furthermore, language is also only one aspect of culture. When a child learns a language, that child also learns about its culture but may not understand a complete way of life and other cultural aspects such as religion, history, politics, and the arts. Bilingual children may not have lived, been educated and interacted much with many native-speakers or they may be immersed in one school culture and another diverse family culture, thus complicating and diversifying the effects of their socialization.

In addition, "languages, like cultures, are rarely sufficient unto themselves. It would be difficult to point to a completely isolated language or dialect." (Hakuta, 1985) The English language, in particular, is spoken in numerous countries and by many peoples around the world. They do not all have a homogenous culture despite their shared language. In addition, the definition of language can also be a murky one. Do the people from Singapore, England, Wales and Switzerland, for example, all speak the same kind of English? Is dialect not a varying

form of language, if not a different communication system altogether and thus transmitting varying ethnotheories in its usage?

Additionally, the concept of 'culture' is a murky one. We often talk about cultural differences based on national boundaries or racial divisions. According to the Oxford Dictionary, culture is defined as "the customary beliefs, social forms, material traits of a racial, religious or social group". Many social groups such as families from the same community and racial group have fewer beliefs and ways of living in common with their neighbors than with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. How valid is it to talk about a cultural identity when there are many sub-cultures in any racial, religious, or national group? Kelling's concept of 'linguistic sub-communities' refers to the language used in various sub-cultures that are part of the dominant culture but can differ quite remarkably from it. "The language and ethnotheories of a linguistic sub-community can thus be very different from the dominant culture." (Kelling, 1975)

Caregivers transmit values, thoughts, personal views, and views about society to their children by their use of language. Each caregiver, as a role model, has his or her own personality and beliefs and they are transmitted uniquely through various forms of socialization. All of the above factors cross the lines of communication and combine to influence the transmission of ethnotheories within a language and culture. This tangled web of socialization will have discrete effects on each unique child.

V Conclusion

There is an interwoven relationship between thought, language, and culture. An unobservable web of complicated, overlapping, multi-directional experiences act as agents of socialization. As 'adult guides' or role models, one of the ways caregivers socialize their children is with their use of language. The direct effects of the transmission of ethnotheories by caregivers can not be completely disentangled from other agents of socialization. Furthermore, the unique way each child internalizes these influences may often be discreet. Language does not exist in isolation from culture, nevertheless, it is on to itself, a powerful tool in communicating cultural norms. It is important that caregivers are aware of the words and communicative style they use in order to be sensitive of the impact their language has on the socialization of children.

This is particularly so in regards to bilingual children. Consistency between the two languages being learned may not always be possible and thus greater care must be taken to realize the values and ideas being communicated by both languages and the thoughts being formulated by the bilingual child. The ethnotheories may be those transmitted by the amalgamation of both languages

whereby the child adopts aspects from both languages as they are learnt simultaneously along with other cultural aspects. How a bilingual child internalizes ethnotheories is not clear and highly dependent on the uniqueness of each individual bilingual learner. How each individual child reconciles the two sets of values needs further study.

There also needs to be more research investigating the degree to which communication style and language use transmit ethnotheories. Caregivers need to become more sensitive to their role as transmitters of values, beliefs, and attitudes to all children with their use of language and, in the case of bilingual children, sometimes conflicting ethnotheories. The way these influences are internalized by children and the present and future effect they have on learners needs to be more closely examined with an awareness of the different kinds of bilingual children. A greater understanding of bilingual children's internalization of two ethnotheories is a call for caregivers to rise to the challenge of not only being linguistic but also moral and social guides to bilingual children.

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