

Linguistic Identity: Tracing the Relationship between Language and Identity.

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Introduction

Imagine if you will, a rainy day on the campus of a Midwest university in the United States, there are five persons patiently standing at a bus stop. After some time, the bus comes speeding by, without stopping. As the bus passes it dips into a muddy puddle at the side of the road and drenches all five with all the muck, grime and rainwater from Wisconsin Avenue. The following is their reaction.

Passenger A: "That was rude"

Passenger B: "Bloody Hell"

Passenger C: "I am calling the bus company right now to report bus number 664."

Passenger D: "¡ Ay, Dios Mío!"

Passenger E: "WTF"

Based on the linguistic utterances of the five passengers above we can make assumptions about their identities, that is, we conjure up images in our head based on their individual responses. According to Micah Andrews, "language forms part of the identity kit of an individual and transmits information such as gender, ethnicity, geographical origin, occupation, and social class among others" (Andrews 86, 2010). If we take Andrew's claim seriously then we can infer information about the identities of the speakers above. For example, we might be able to tell the ethnic and geographical origin of one or more of the speakers. We might also be able to guess the gender and age of each speaker. Some of the more creative among us might even have well-formed pictures of how each passenger is dressed. The identities we assign to each speaker maybe based on crude, incomplete, and or questionable stereotypes. The accuracy or inaccuracy of the assumptions we make is irrelevant, what is noteworthy is that we recognize that there is a link between the language one speaks and her identity, we can tell something about a speaker

based on her speech. The language one speaks is inextricably linked to the self. Andrews's, definition includes what I take to be some necessary conditions for the relationship between language and identity. However, I find it insufficient in articulating the nuances and particularities of the concept. The definition must by necessity be more capacious, it ought to include the various sub-concepts that it entails. The language we speak is such a fundamental part of who we are that it is often difficult to separate it as a discrete identity category, as a result, it is often mistakenly subsumed under one of the categories contained within it. This mistake is a special case of the whole part distinction, where the whole is distributed among its parts. A definition of Linguistic identity must bring together the various parts into one coherent and precise definition. The aim here is to understand what is this “thing” linguistic identity?

Linguistic identity captures the relationship between language and identity. It should be noted that linguistic identity is a special kind of composite identity (at the least the kind that is of concern here) that properly belongs to human persons. It is both a subspecies of the psychological view of personal identity¹ and a category of social identity, it captures one's ability to communicate and also one's participation in a language community. It is a subspecies of the psychological view of personal identity; it requires a mental connectedness to and continuity of one's internal state, that coheres with one's external linguistic expressions.

The literature on linguistic identity is frustratingly sparse. Although numerous linguists employ the term very few have offered a precisising definition of the term. To this end this discussion is an attempt to sketch an operative definition of linguistic identity. In what follows I

¹ Lewis, David. “Survival and Identity”. *Philosophical Papers* 1 (1983): 55-77 David Lewis defines personal identity as mental connectedness and psychological continuity. Mental connectedness is dependence on and similarity between the present mental state of a person and the state that immediately precedes it. Lewis's theory of stages claims that a person's mental state at any point in time is one stage, which makes up segments in a continued succession of mental states. Therefore, identity at any point in time becomes a connection between this stage “rightly related” to those preceding or following it in a structured, logical manner. According to Lewis there are gradual changes between each successive stage and the overall change in disposition throughout a person's life stages ought not to be major. Each stage ought to be causally dependent on the stage before it.

examine this relationship between language and identity by answering the question “what is linguistic identity?” There are two related questions that I consider: (1) “What is at stake when linguistic identity is ignored?” (2) “What can a distinctly “Caribbeanist” analysis of linguistic identity add to this discussion?” This is a precursor to a larger discussion on linguistic oppression and linguistic discrimination. I begin by using the condition of bilingual aphasia to outline what I take to be the constituent parts of linguistic identity which are: the idiolect, the dialect, and linguistic agency. I conclude by arguing for the process of creolization as both a mode of resistance and a praxis of identity formation.

Assumptions

There are three primitive assumptions that operate in the background of my formulation of this conception of linguistic identity. Firstly, I take the existence of natural (and social) kinds as a given. There are groups of “things” or “entities” that share a fundamental set of causal properties. Where the causal properties that delimits the category is of a social nature, that is, a shared social or historical experience, this becomes a social rather than a “natural” kind. Secondly, I take as given the Lockean concept that persons are fundamentally forensic in nature. One implication of the forensic criterion for personhood is that persons are self-legislating entities, in other words persons are agents. Further I infer that persons are linguistic agents; this is a necessary feature of linguistic identity. It is agency that makes a person a linguistic subject. Thirdly, I agree with Davidson that thought and speech are coextensive- it is almost impossible to explain one without the other. This implies that all speech originates in thought.

Most contemporary discussions on language begin with some appeal to Chomsky’s theory of Transformational Generative Grammar (universal grammar). Chomsky argued that language is an innate human faculty, there is a universal grammatical system on which all

languages are built. This, he asserts, is a benign process by which language is something that happens to us, in the ‘normal’ course of human development. If the Universal Grammar thesis is true, then language incommensurability is false. That is, with sufficient effort we can translate from one language to another unproblematically. Chomsky’s innatism contradicts the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which argues that one’s native language affects one’s world view². Linguistic dissimilarity according to this view makes it impossible for persons who “reside” in one language to successfully translate the meaning of utterances by others who “reside” in another language. If the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is true then, linguistic incommensurability is true. Despite the tension between these two views, it seems one could reasonably accept both. The two positions are not mutually exclusive, with slight moderations it is tenable to hold that language is a natural human capacity (without accepting the universal grammar thesis) and also acknowledge that there is a social aspect to language that is tied to an individual’s life world. While these two positions are useful in articulating how individual language development occurs, only the latter helps with clarifying the relationship between language and social identity. Although the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis acknowledges the linguistic subject, it falls short of granting linguistic agency to the subject. On this view, language stills function as “something” that happens to humans albeit within our social environment. It is noteworthy that neither of these theories address linguistic identity. Linguistic identity is a meta-language concept that is antecedent and logically prior to the concerns of both theories.

What is Linguistic Identity?

Identity is essentially the relationship between an object and itself over time. Personal identity is the relationship of the person to herself overtime. Linguistic identity is the relationship

² Linguistic determinism is a stronger version of this theory- it is the belief that cognitive behavior is determined by one’s native language.

of a personal to her language over time. There are three components of linguistic identity – the idiolect, the dialect and, linguistic agency. the idiolect (personal identity), dialect (linguistic community, in other words one’s social identity), and linguistic agency (that is how the idiolect and dialect come together to give one epistemic agency within his or her language community.)

Every linguistic subject has a recognizable idiolect, that is, a unique way of sentence composition that serves as an identity marker. According to David Wright “Idiolect refers to an individual’s unique variety and/or use of language from the level of the phoneme to the level of discourse” (Oxford Bibliographies, David Wright, 2018). The theory holds that no two persons who share a common language have exactly the same linguistic repertoire. Even within a linguistic community the subject has agency to use language in particular ways that serve as an identity marker for that agent.

The condition of bilingual aphasia helps to explicate the components of linguistic identity. Say I suffer stroke and the result is bilingual aphasia. What if the result of my condition is that I can no longer speak my native language – I can only speak English. There would be questions about my personal identity. For example, is pre-stroke Kiesha and post-stroke Kiesha the same person? The answer to this question will depend on whether one has commitments to perdurance or endurance. Recall my claim above that thought and speech are coextensive. There would also questions about my social identity. By speaking only English I would be locked out of the linguistic community of native Jamaican speakers. I might also have a different relationship to English, for example, I might not need to translate my sentences into English before I speak. In *Black skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims “a man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by the language”, (Fanon 1952, 2). In this regard linguistic identity is a category of social identity in so far as one is a

member of a community that speaks a particular language and is socially defined by that identity marker. There is a history and culture associated with specific languages that cannot be uncoupled. My being unable to speak the Jamaican dialect would necessarily affect my identity in non-trivial ways. A Dialect “refers to a language variety which is used in a geographically limited part of language area in which it is ‘roofed’ by a structurally related standard variety: a dialect typically displays structural peculiarities in several language components” (Auer et al, 2005). A dialect therefore is the social linguistic element around which the most basic linguistic community is formed.

My linguistic agency as a speaker of the native Jamaican language would also be compromised. Linguistic agency is the third component or constituent part of linguistic identity. This is where linguistic subjects act as self-legislating members of linguistic community. Recall my claim above that linguistic subjects are agents. There is an epistemic component to linguistic agency, as it is epistemic agency within a specific linguistic community. It is how the agent is able to navigate her community qua linguistic subject.

What is at Stake when Linguistic Identity is Violated?

Based on my claim that linguistic identity is both a subspecies of personal identity and a category social identity there are three constitutive components of linguistic identity: personal identity, linguistic community and linguistic agency. All three are needed for linguistic identity. Bilingual aphasia causes us to question identity based on a change in language. Just suppose this is not the result of a biological event. Can we imagine a world in which one has an encounter in which she is forced to lose her accent? Further imagine a world in which one is forced to forget

her native tongue.³ If language and identity are connected in the ways illustrated above, there are implications for identity when language goes awry. The same when language policies go awry.

There are cases in which native speakers of particular languages are encouraged to “forget” their native tongues or accents for social or economic expediency. One of the most egregious cases was a child custody case in Texas. In a child-custody case Judge Samuel C. Kiser accused Martha Laureano of child abuse for speaking only Spanish to her five-year-old daughter. His exact words were: “If she starts first grade with the other children and cannot even speak the language that the teachers and the other children speak and she’s a full-blood American citizen...you’re abusing that child and you’re relegating her to the position of a housemaid...Now, get this straight. You start speaking English to this child because if she doesn’t do good in school, then I can remove her because it’s not in her best interest to be ignorant. This child will only hear English.” At one-point Ms. Laureano responded, “you’re just against me because I’m Mexican”. Would we have the same questions about identity? It is curious that Kiser equates bilingualism with ignorance. This is a clear case of marginalization of an identity through language. The child can speak both Spanish and English without compromising her intelligence, in fact, as an American child of Mexican parents she belongs to that particular linguistic community in which there are two mother tongues. This judge’s ruling results in material harm for both the child and her parents.

³ In a routine child-custody case in Texas (find the specific place) in 1996 Judge Samuel C. Kiser accused Martha Laureano of child abuse for speaking only Spanish to her five-year-old daughter. His exact words were: “If she starts first grade with the other children and cannot even speak the language that the teachers and the other children speak and she’s a full-blood American citizen...you’re abusing that child and you’re relegating her to the position of a housemaid...Now, get this straight. You start speaking English to this child because if she doesn’t do good in school, then I can remove her because it’s not in her best interest to be ignorant. This child will only hear English.”At one-point Ms. Laureano responded “ you’re just against me because I’m Mexican”.

What can a distinctly “Caribbeanist” Perspective Contribute to the Discussion of Linguistic Identity?

There is a passage in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that illustrates this notion of linguistic injustice meted out against colonized peoples. In post-colonial⁴ discourse *The Tempest* has been referenced in an attempt to clarify the ills of colonialization and to initiate the discussion of decolonization⁵. Although there are numerous literary critiques on the use of language⁶ in *The Tempest*, what has remained largely unexamined is the nature of the relationship between language and identity⁷ and the significance of linguistic oppression in facilitating other forms of oppression. The exchange below between Caliban and Miranda helps to clarify the three key elements of the relationship between language and identity listed above: (1) linguistic communities, (2) personal identity, and (3) linguistic agency.

Miranda: *Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
³⁶⁰ One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like*

⁴ George Lamming asserts the ethnic and cultural underpinnings of art and language in *The Pleasures of Exile*. Lamming relates the issues of Caribbean otherness, identity, language, and literature to the pervasive and inevitable dynamic of confrontation between colonizer and colonized, master and slave, European and non-European others (Amerindian, African, Asian). For Lamming, the conceptual metaphor is that of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*; hence, the conflict between Prospero the colonizer, and Caliban the native becomes paradigmatic of the major historical opposition and the overarching dialectic of Caribbean society.

⁵ This is tied to the wave of pro-independence that swept over the Caribbean and Africa. “*Between 1957 and 1973 the vast majority of African and Caribbean colonies won their independence...this period was distinguished, among Caribbean and African intellectuals, by a pervasive mood of optimistic outrage*” (Nixon 1987, 557).

⁶ “While *The Tempest* has been a classic subject of rereading and rewriting, it is in Caliban’s encounter with Prospero’s language that some of the most interesting questions of post-colonial transformation emerge” (Ashcroft 2001, 84).

⁷ The relationship between language and identity constitutes linguistic identity. Linguistic identity is both a subspecies of the psychological view of personal identity and a category of social identity, it captures one’s ability to communicate and also one’s participation in a language community. It is a subspecies of the psychological view of personal identity; it requires a mental connectedness to and continuity of one’s internal state, that coheres with one’s external linguistic expressions. It is a category of social identity in so far as one is a member of a community that speaks a particular language and is socially defined by that identity marker.

*A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in 't which good natures
³⁶⁵ Could not abide to be with. Therefore, wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison.*

*Caliban: You taught me language and my profit on 't
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
³⁷⁰ For learning me your language!*

Caliban's epigrammatic retort aptly captures the results of hegemonic linguistic practices that is, the underside of linguistic identity or linguistic oppression⁸. His reply to Miranda hints at: (1) the power dynamic within a colonial linguistic community, (2) the alienation of the self through the heteronomous imposition of a foreign language, and (3) linguistic injustice.

Caliban accuses Miranda of teaching him "her language". Caliban's accusation is based in the mistaken assumption that language⁹ properly belongs to Miranda (the colonizer) and not him (the colonized). This classification of language as belonging to "the colonizer" and not "the colonized" is a category mistake. It miscategorizes language as a static entity that exists independent of the speakers. While I reject the hypothesis that language is the kind of "thing" that can belong to a person, I will concede that the colonized subject has a different orientation to

⁸ Bill Ashcroft argues, "Language is not one aspect of a broad range of colonizing strategies, it is the very mode of cultural control, the vehicle in which those strategies are effected...When we examine the scene closely we will that it rehearses several of the most profound and troubling aspects of linguistic colonization: the issue of place and the power of imperial technology; the power of naming; the relationship between language and power itself; the connection between language and race; and the constitutive and therefore putatively ontological power of a dominant language" (Ashcroft 2001, 86).

⁹ The following quote from Sartre highlights the hegemonic use of language and the misconstrued nature of the linguistic relationships between subjects. "Having been dispersed to the four corners of the earth by the slave trade, blacks have no common language: in order to incite the oppressed to unite, they must necessarily rely on the words of the oppressors' language. And French is the language that will furnish the black poet with the largest audience, at least within the limits of French colonization" Sartre's claim that blacks (let us ignore for the moment the problematic use of the word "black") have no common language is based on the understanding that language properly belongs to the French colonizer and not the colonized peoples. In the excerpt above Caliban accuses Miranda of "learning him her language". This is as much a claim about language as it is about identity, recall the assertion above, that there is an inextricable link between language and identity, any claim about language inadvertently makes assumptions about identity.

language than the “colonizer”. However, they are members of the same linguistic community¹⁰ and Miranda teaching him language indicates his position in the linguistic community. In as much as Caliban, Miranda speaks the same language, they are defined by the same linguistic marker. Miranda has the power to set the linguistic standards and dictate the norms that will govern the language. It is questionable whether Miranda’s power is absolute because, Caliban has through the subversive move of cursing, tries (and succeeds) in reasserting his agency in his community. Caliban through his “cursing” has essentially reshaped and restructured the linguistic community, note Miranda is also cursing, she too is responding to Caliban. Recall the above discussion on idiolect. Although the power imbalance has not been completely rectified something has changed in Miranda, because they are members of the same linguistic community, she necessarily must respond to Caliban. It is this shift that denotes the power of creolization. This is the power of creolization.

In some sense, a Caribbean perspective is similar (maybe even synonymous) to a decolonial perspective. However, the Caribbean presents a unique historical¹¹ and geopolitical situation¹².

There are two ways in which a Caribbean philosophical analysis is nuanced, it is

¹⁰ One of the challenges of this study will be to develop a concept of a language community as there is dissent among linguistics as to what constitutes a language community. A speech community is a social construct which requires a collective consciousness and agreed upon norms. One very basic definition of a speech community “a group of people who use the same set of speech signals is a speech-community” (Bloomfield 1933, 29). This the definition admits only of a mono-linguistic community. However, speech communities are dynamic. Also, it is possible to participate in multiple language communities. For the purpose of this discussion, I am rejecting the linguistic definition of community in favor of a sense of community that explicates the relationship between the individual and the community, that is, the relationship among individuals. The sense of community that informs this definition of linguistic community is more in line with Aristotle’s definition of the *Polis* in Book 1 of the *Politics* – in particular the linguistic argument where the individual needs the *polis* in order to actualize her capacity for logos.

¹¹ The history of philosophy in the Caribbean is also unique, Paget Henry identifies historical periods associated with philosophical traditions in the Caribbean. Each period being a philosophical response to the political and economic situation. Henry, Paget. *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹² Caribbean Islands fall under the United Nations classification of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), these are island countries that face unique challenges because of their size, economies, and geographic locations. Any philosophical work that comes out the Caribbean has to include in its philosophy these practical concerns. Caribbean Philosophy, therefore, cannot afford to be abstract and ahistorical.

interdisciplinary, and it is defined by the process of creolization. Lewis Gordon argues that this kind of analysis “shifts the geography of reason”. This is meant to decenter Euro-centric ways of being by engaging and taking seriously the south-south dialogue. Jennifer Vest Purports to offer a new dialogic of Caribbean philosophy¹³. The methodology does not only disturb the relationship between the periphery and the center, but it questions the very idea of the center as a fixed or Archimedean point of reason.

In *Caliban's Reason*, Paget Henry claims, to find philosophy in different spaces, that is, non-traditional places where it has been overlooked, namely in African and Caribbean spaces. He is engaged in a more radical project that he wants to admit. He has expanded the notion of space to include academic disciplines outside of philosophy. This forms the basis of a distinctly Caribbean analysis, it is an expansion of what is “traditionally” perceived as philosophy, it lies outside of and is therefore not constrained by the rules of the philosophical canon. Given the history of intellectual thought in the Caribbean “philosophy” as traditionally construed was not available as a body of knowledge to draw from, hence Caribbean intellectuals found other ways of asking and answering philosophical questions. Some philosophical questions cannot be answered within philosophy, at least not the limited definition of philosophy that has come to mean the analytic/continental divide or the East/West divide. Caribbean Philosophical concerns have often been addressed in the literature.

¹³ The New Dialogic seeks also to consider new possibilities regarding what types of questions are philosophical i.e. must they be definable as metaphysical, ethical, or epistemological? We cannot determine the important questions by looking only within the confines of one culture, one epistemic frame. By shifting the focus from monologues to dialogues, and by shifting the geography of philosophy, the New Dialogic will eliminate the oppressive and limiting ways in which racialized hierarchies of knowledge have defined the discipline and conditioned non-Western access to and influence on it. Vest, Jennifer, L. “The Promise of Caribbean Philosophy: How it Can Contribute to a ‘New Dialogic’ in Philosophy.” *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 Jul-Dec 2005, pp3-34

Take the question of personal identity, for example. How do we answer the question of “what does it mean to be a creole/Is the creole a person?” Jean Rhys in her literary work, *Wide Sargasso Sea* deals with the metaphysical question of personal identity, by giving narrative identity to Charlotte Bronte’s “Creole in the attic”, a minor character in the book *Jane Eyre*. Bronte’s disheveled, unkempt, insane, two-dimensional character becomes a fully human person endowed with agency.¹⁴

The Caribbean is the space of the creolized being. Note both Caliban and Miranda must adjust their language in order to interact with each other. It is perhaps accurate to assert that anything that currently exists in the Caribbean is a product of miscegenation and creolization. Hence on the question on linguistic identity, the Caribbean offers the potential for liberation via the process of creolization. Creolization is an identity forming practice that aims at liberation. “Liberation is best understood as a process, or perhaps appropriately an ongoing praxis, harboring both critical and creative potentialities (Silva 2018, 7). Liberation is not an end goal with specific possibilities, rather, it is an open-ended praxis of autonomy and self-determination.

¹⁴ There are numerous other examples of addressing philosophical questions from outside of the discipline of philosophy, for example, Caroline Cooper. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the Vulgar Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.