

Linguistic Discrimination: Theoretical Framework

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Abstract: This article offers a deep dive into linguistic discrimination through a comprehensive theoretical lens, bridging sociolinguistics, anthropology, and sociology. Rooted in historical, social, and cultural narratives, linguistic discrimination is more than just a bias; it epitomizes prevailing power dynamics and societal hierarchies. The piece traces the historical role of linguistic biases in colonization and political control while shedding light on sociolinguistic aspects of language prestige and stigma. Through an anthropological perspective, it emphasizes the integral role of language in cultural identity, highlighting the adverse impacts of discrimination on communities. Additionally, a sociological lens reveals the systemic repercussions of such discrimination, from limited resources and opportunities to the internalization of harmful stereotypes. Ultimately, the article aims to present a nuanced understanding of linguistic discrimination, fostering insights for promoting linguistic equity.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistic identity, linguistic identity, linguistic discrimination, social identity theory, societal implications.

Introduction

Language is perceived as a fundamental aspect of societies, embodying culture, history, and identity. It serves as a medium for expressing thoughts, conveying experiences, and building connections. However, in an intricately diverse world, this crucial tool of understanding can simultaneously function as an avenue for division and bias. *Linguistic discrimination* arises when individuals or groups undergo unfavourable treatment attributed to their use of language, dialect, accent, or vocabulary. Discriminatory grounds, traditionally identified as race, religion, and gender, are found to extend to the realm of linguistic expression. This introduction is designed to illuminate the intricacies of linguistic discrimination, scrutinizing its roots and examining its comprehensive impacts on individuals and communities. The exploration of this topic reveals the intersectionality of linguistic prejudice with racial, class, and identity issues, thus unfolding the profound complexity of this broadly neglected form of bias.

Literature review

Linguistic discrimination, also known as *linguicism* or *language discrimination*, is a type of prejudice and discrimination in which individuals are treated differently based on their language abilities, dialect, or accent. This form of discrimination can manifest in social, professional, or educational settings, leading to marginalization and unfair treatment of individuals or communities. In extreme cases, it may even result in the suppression or extinction of certain languages (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988).

Linguistic discrimination can be either covert, where it is not openly acknowledged but is embedded within social norms and practices, or overt, where it is explicit and can be found in laws and policies. Research has shown that language discrimination can have profound impacts on affected individuals, including reduced opportunities for education and employment, diminished self-esteem, and higher rates of mental health issues (see Piller, 2016).

Linguistic discrimination, spanning a vast spectrum of experiences, is a multifaceted issue addressed by various scholars and institutions. The Cambridge Handbook on Language Policy notes that language policies and practices can inadvertently lead to inequalities among linguistic groups, often deeming some dialects or accents inferior to others (see Spolsky, 2012). On a human rights front, UNESCO portrays linguistic discrimination as an impediment to the fundamental right to education. This discrimination arises when individuals are denied educational opportunities in their native languages or face derogation for employing them (see UNESCO, 2003).

From an institutional perspective, The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) comprehends this discrimination as any unjust treatment meted out based on linguistic characteristics, such as accent or syntax. This unjust treatment often stems from societal stereotypes about the intelligence or socioeconomic status of the speakers (see LSA, 1997). Moreover, sociolinguists argue that it is not merely about the differential treatment of speakers; it is also deeply entwined with the underlying perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that drive such behaviour. Certain linguistic variations might face stigmatization due to negative associations with particular social groups, making language a powerful tool for social judgments (see Lippi-Green, 1997).

Historical Context of Linguistic Discrimination

Throughout history, the manipulation and control of language have been instrumental in establishing and maintaining dominance over various groups and territories. One potent illustration of this is the imposition of a language on a colonized population. Colonizers often saw this as a multifaceted strategy.

For instance, during the British colonization of India, English was promoted as the language of administration, education, and governance. This promotion sidelined many of India's indigenous languages, pushing them away from official spaces, even

though they continued to be widely spoken at grassroots levels. Similarly, in Africa, countries under French colonization like Senegal, Mali, and Ivory Coast saw the pervasive spread of the French language, often at the expense of native languages such as Wolof, Bambara, and Baoulé.

On one hand, imposing their language was a potent means of asserting power and dominance. By sidelining and, in many cases, actively suppressing indigenous languages, colonizers could symbolically diminish the cultural and historical importance of the colonized people.

On the other hand, the imposition of a singular language, especially one familiar to the colonizers, simplified governance and administration. For example, the Spanish Empire, in its conquest of vast territories in the Americas, implemented Spanish as the primary language of education and governance. This not only facilitated smoother administrative control but also systematically reduced the prominence of indigenous languages in Mexico (e.g. Nahuatl, Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, Otomi, Tzotzil, Mazahua, Chol, Huastec, Purépecha, Chatino, Chinantec, Tojolabal, Mazatec, Yaqui) and Peru (e.g. Quechua, Aymara, Asháninka, Aguaruna, Shipibo, Cusco Quechua, Huallaga Huánuco Quechua, Machiguenga, Urarina, Awajún).

Moreover, the ripple effects of such linguistic imposition persist today. In the Philippines, despite gaining independence from Spain and later the United States, Filipino and English remain as official languages, with many indigenous languages marginalized in official capacities. Many post-colonial nations grapple with the linguistic remnants of their colonial past, leading to a complex web of identity issues, cultural preservation struggles, and debates on the roles of indigenous versus colonial languages in education, governance, and public life. This historical context is crucial to understanding the deep roots and far-reaching impacts of linguistic discrimination in various societies.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The phenomenon of linguistic discrimination can be better understood when examined through the lens of various sociological and psychological theories. Two such pivotal theories that shed light on this subject are the *Social Identity Theory* and the *Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory*.

Social Identity Theory : Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s, the Social Identity Theory posits that individuals classify themselves and the people around them into different social categories (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These categorizations lead to the formation of ‘in-groups’ (groups to which individuals perceive they belong) and ‘out-groups’ (groups to which they feel they do not belong). Language, being an immediate and salient feature of communication and identity, often serves as a clear demarcation between these groups. Consequently, discrimination emerges when one group perceives its linguistic attributes to be superior or more legitimate than those of other groups. This sense of superiority can then fuel biases, stereotypes, and discrimination against those who speak differently.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory: Taking a deeper dive into the intrinsic link between language and identity, the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory emphasizes that language is not just a tool for communication but also a potent marker of ethnic identity (see Giles & Johnson, 1981). This theory contends that language forms an integral component of one’s self-concept and personal identity. When linguistic discrimination occurs, it is not merely a judgment on the way someone speaks; it is perceived as a direct attack on their very identity, heritage, and sense of self. Thus, protecting and preserving one’s language becomes tantamount to safeguarding one's identity, which can further intensify reactions to linguistic prejudice.

By understanding these theoretical perspectives, scholars, policymakers, and educators can be better equipped to address and mitigate the consequences of linguistic discrimination in varied contexts.

Forms of Linguistic Discrimination

Linguistic discrimination, an often overlooked form of prejudice, manifests in various ways, impacting individuals and society at large. A deeper analysis into institutional and interpersonal linguisticism provides a clearer picture of this multifaceted discrimination.

Institutional Linguicism

Defined by Phillipson (1992) as the systematic preference shown by institutions towards one language over others, institutional linguisticism can lead to the cultural and linguistic marginalization of certain groups within society. A salient example of this can be seen in the educational systems of numerous countries. For instance, in Australia, English, as the dominant language, is used as the medium of instruction, often sidelining and marginalizing indigenous languages such as the Aboriginal languages. Similarly, in post-colonial African countries like Kenya and Tanzania, English and Swahili are often favoured in education and administration, pushing aside numerous local languages.

Interpersonal Linguicism

Moving from the systemic to the personal, interpersonal linguisticism occurs when individuals face discrimination based on their accent, dialect, or language choice (see Lippi-Green, 1997). This form of discrimination is manifested in daily interactions and often stems from deeply ingrained stereotypes and biases. For example, in the United States, research has indicated that job candidates with Southern accents are sometimes perceived as less competent or less intelligent, leading to unfair treatment in hiring processes. In another instance, speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) often face negative stereotypes and prejudices, influencing their social and professional opportunities.

By understanding the varied forms in which linguistic discrimination can manifest - from structural biases by institutions to personal prejudices in daily interactions - society can better address and counteract its implications. It is crucial to challenge these forms of discrimination to foster linguistic diversity and equity.

Implications of Linguistic Discrimination

Linguistic discrimination, while primarily centred on language, resonates profoundly within both individual psyche and societal structures. The implications of such discrimination are wide-reaching, affecting both the personal well-being of individuals and the harmony of societies at large.

Psychological Implications

Research has consistently shown that individuals who experience linguistic discrimination confront a myriad of psychological challenges. According to a study by Derwing and Munro (2009), individuals who face prejudice based on their accent or linguistic background often grapple with diminished self-esteem. Such discrimination, being a direct attack on a person's identity, can cause feelings of inadequacy, leading to a weakened self-concept. Moreover, the lack of acceptance and constant scrutiny can engender a reduced sense of belonging, pushing individuals to question their place in a community. This, in turn, has been linked to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression in some cases.

Societal Implications

On a broader scale, linguistic discrimination has the potential to engender divisions within society. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) posited that when communities perceive their language as marginalized or disrespected, it can result in feelings of alienation. For example, in regions where minority languages are not recognized or given equal status in official capacities, those linguistic communities might feel disregarded or even oppressed. This can lead to social unrest, protests, and sometimes, more significant movements aimed at achieving linguistic rights and recognition. A case in point is the Québécois movement in Canada, where the French-speaking community sought to preserve and promote its language amidst the predominant English-speaking milieu (see Erfurt, 2010).

Conclusion

Comprehending the theoretical framework of linguistic discrimination aids in a more robust identification and rectification of such biases. This knowledge not only allows us to discern the forms and implications of linguistic discrimination, but also provides a strong foundation to inform corrective measures. Linguicism, in its multifaceted nature, is deeply entwined with identity, history, and power dynamics, components that need to be addressed to achieve a linguistically inclusive society.

Fostering an environment of linguistic acceptance begins with heightened awareness and education. Curricula that inform and inspire appreciation for linguistic diversity can contribute to the eradication of biases. Initiatives should focus on demystifying languages and dialects, challenging stereotypes, and showcasing the richness of linguistic diversity. By doing so, people can ensure that awareness translates into respect for all languages and dialects, reducing the frequency and impact of linguistic discrimination.

There is a pressing need for policy-level interventions that ensure the equitable representation of all languages. Affirming the rights of speakers of all languages, especially those from marginalized and minority linguistic communities, is paramount. Policy interventions could include granting official status to these languages, providing resources for their preservation and growth, and ensuring they have a voice in public discourse.

Achieving linguistic inclusivity also requires a significant shift in societal attitudes towards embracing and celebrating linguistic diversity. This entails recognizing and respecting the pivotal role of language in forming individual identities and cultural narratives. By encouraging societal recognition of all languages and dialects, people can foster a sense of belonging among speakers of marginalized languages, thus contributing to societal harmony.

Addressing linguistic discrimination involves more than recognizing language biases. It necessitates an understanding of the relationship between language and identity. A comprehensive approach that considers the nuances of human language and its connection to individual and group identity may contribute to a linguistically inclusive society.

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