Language, Cultural Unity, Society, and Politics in the Context of Language Teaching, Learning, and Policy

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Abstract

Language, cultural unity, society, and politics are closely related terms and have effects on one another. They form an important part of people because of being directly related to people's forming societies and cultures, behaviors, communication ways, and understanding the world. Consequently, they are key factors to determine language teaching, learning, and policy. Though there are different studies on this issue, there is not a direct literature review study that combines each of them and evaluates their effects on each other. Therefore, the present study aimed to explain the relationship between them in order to make language teaching, learning, and policy more effective. It first mentioned the relation between culture and language. Second, it indicated how cultural unity and society are connected and related to language. Then, it ended up with the evaluation of the impact of politics on language, cultural unity, and society.

Key words: Language, Cultural Unity, Society, and Politics

Introduction

Language, cultural unity, society, and politics are closely related terms, and each one has an important impact on one another. As a result, they have an important place in people's lives because they are directly related to the way people form their societies and cultures, the way they behave and communicate with each other in their societies, and the way they perceive the world. In order to understand the relation between these terms, first the relation between culture and language should be known. Second, it is important to find out how cultural unity and society are connected and related to language. Then, the impact of politics on language, cultural unity, and society should be known.

Language and Culture

According to Ünalan (2002), a culture is a combination of moral and material living styles of a society that are passed on from generations to generations and helps individuals and societies to gain their own individualism, personality, and identity. Besides, it leads to connectedness, unites societies, and determines the living area depending on values, norms, and social control. Culture requires some components to be generated. Ünalan (2002) listed the components of culture as follow: religion, language, historical heritage, war, migration, agriculture, trade, economy, politics, art, literature, law, geography, environment, and morality. Except language, the other components create the basis of culture while language itself creates or transmits the other components. For example, historical heritage is directly connected to the history of a society and constitutes an important part of the culture of that society. That heritage is passed on from one generation to other generation through language. Literature indicates the living style of a society and is created by using language orally or in a written way. Now it is good to look at some definitions of language and analyze the relation between language and culture. In his book, Ünalan (2002) mentioned many definitions of language. In one definition, language is unique to a society and a kind of oral and written system that members of that society use in order to communicate their feelings and thoughts and to communicate with each other. Similarly, it is a kind of system that has occurred in a long time as a result of various historical, geographical, and cultural conditions (Ünalan, 2002). In another definition, it is a natural tool that enables people to communicate, a living creature that lives and develops according to its own rules, and an institution that combines a nation, protects it, and is a common property of it (Ünalan, 2002). The definitions show that

language is a tool that contributes to communicating thoughts and feelings and to communication between people, that has a history of its own formation, and that has a strong connection with societies. Therefore, language is a key element to form societies because it opens a way to a group of people to speak their thoughts and feelings, which leads to connectedness and commonness among those people and results in the formation of culture based on those. To understand this assumption better, the following should be known: There are some components of culture like religion, morality, literature, and law. If they are looked at carefully, it is seen that they are products of language. In other words, people may have thought about those components, come up with some thoughts about them, and used their thoughts to create and reflect the products of literature, the rules of law, or stories about wars or their agricultural and geographical lives. Such things occurred as a result of using language. Therefore, language both creates and reflects such things. As seen, the formation of the components requires a thought process, which shows that language both creates thought and is created by thought. To exemplify this, Gokturk Inscriptions are the first writing monuments of the Turks. They talk about how old Turkish state was collapsed and what Turkish people should do to protect their nation and also their state against their enemies. Telling those experiences must have required a carefully planned thought process, so they must have shaped the use of language in the inscriptions. Also, the language used gives some information about the life style of old Turkish people because it includes many words related to wars, militarist life style, and livestock, which are unique to old Turkish people living at that time (Ünalan, 2002). To sum up, language plays an important role in the culture of a society through the reflection and creation of the culture components.

Language, Cultural Identity, and Society

To analyze the connection between language, cultural identity, and society, kinds of language such as standard and regional languages should be known first. In her book, İmer (1990) studied the relation between language and society. She mentioned the use of language according to the social groups in the society and two theories about this: deficiency theory and difference theory.

According to deficiency theory, there are two kinds of language, each of which has a unique system determined by the child's parents. They are public language (which is less grammatical and explanatory) and formal language (which is more grammatical and explanatory as it requires more cognitive process to produce language) (İmer, 1990). Then

public language was renamed as restricted code that indicates that a person cannot express what he wants with his linguistic competence while elaborated code previously known as formal language shows a person benefits from his linguistic competence to express what he wants with complex ideas (İmer, 1990). This is a kind of classifying as good and bad or as sufficient and deficient. As İmer mentioned, in these languages, children learn the social structure by experiencing it through their language, their learning about the social structure starts at home and goes on at school, and so children become a part of a social system. The linguistic behaviors in a family influence children's linguistic behaviors, that is, their use of language. As seen, socialization affects the structure of language.

On the other hand, difference theory claims that languages cannot be classified as better and worse or as more sufficient and more deficient, but claims that each language has its own system, instead (İmer, 1990). It determines how different language systems differ from each other, how changes in languages are perceived and how languages change by replacing another one, and how different language systems are mixed or change in terms of phonology, syntax, and semantics, and how those are acquired and protected (İmer, 1990). Depending on these interests of difference theory, four kinds of language are mentioned: standard, regional, social, and functional. Standard language also known as official, national, or country language is adopted and institutionalized in the society. According to İmer, there are some criteria about standard language:

- **Basic features**: The language's grammatical, lexical, semantic, and syntactic features should become permanent by using a relevant coding system (writing). Then it should shift from being a spoken language to the language of science.
- **The functions of the standard language in the society**: It is unifying because it combines all different regional languages and accents in a linguistic society which has one standard language, is distinguishing because it differs its speakers from the speakers of another language, is prestigious, and has a frame of reference which helps its users to understand what is right or wrong or to understand what is written in a story or poem.
- **Attitudes towards the standard language**: Its users are loyal to that language, and it is prestigious among them. It also has a norm sensitivity related to the function of a standard language's having a frame of reference.

Regional language is generally used in oral communication and differs from the standard language in terms of phonology, phonetics, and vocabulary. There is not a written and oral regulation in regional language (İmer, 1990). Social language is related to a particular group, and it has different vocabulary that is not very common in standard language (İmer, 1990). In addition, a speaker may have many functional languages that he/she uses in different situations in their daily lives (İmer, 1990). For example, the way he/she speaks with a teacher is very formal and includes grammatically correct sentences with formal words like sir while he/she makes less grammatical sentences and prefers using informal vocabulary like dude or yeah when talking with a friend. In this example, there are two functional languages that already exist and the speaker only decides when and where to use.

Another term related to the connection between language, cultural unity, and society is socialization. İmer (1990) explained one aspect of this relationship when she talked about deficiency theory in her book. According to her, children start to be socialized at home and go on being socialized at school, which has a direct influence on children's linguistic behaviors. While children are getting socialized, they also learn the society's structure that is composed of values, norms, and social control (Ünalan, 2002). Values are espousals and beliefs that are considered as the reason of the existence, function, unity, and continuity of a social structure, and are supported and protected as a result while norms are applications of values to specific issues, both of which form and maintain the social structure, which is called as social control (Ünalan, 2002). Values, norms, and social control generate culture because a social structure can be integrated, protect its existence, and maintain it through these components (Ünalan, 2002). In other words, the society creates its values and norms via their language, controls, organizes, and even punishes their groups if necessary.

According to Kramsch (1998), ethnicity, race, regional identity, and national identity are used to form the identity of a social group, but it does not work efficiently. For example, an African-American may explain his/her identity depending on being a member of black race while a white American might explain his/her identity depending on his/her nationality. Also, Kramsch stated out that spoken language could be used to determine a group's identity because it forms a discourse group whose members share similar viewpoints about the world. That is, people in the group identify themselves as the members of that group, from which they draw personal strength, pride, social importance, and historical continuity. Therefore,

they can form their cultural identity. As seen, a group needs an identity to form a society, and this may happen through language.

Language and Politics

In terms of the relation between language and politics, Joseph (2006) claimed that language is political from top to bottom because humans who speak a language are political creatures from birth. Dunbar (1996) mentioned that people started to form coalitions in order to survive and procreate and during this process people formed language to show that they were members of the group (cited in Joseph, 2006, p. 1). In accordance with these assumptions, Joseph stated that languages are formed depending on the practices of speech and writing and the beliefs of those doing the speaking and writing. He also added that the spoken language is shaped by who it is that the speaker is speaking to and by how his relationship with the hearer will be affected by what he says. In relation to this, the politics of identity shapes how the speaker interprets what people say to him to decide the truth-value of their utterances. As a result, the use of politics in social life can be associated with power. Interpreting the language use in terms of whether it is linguistically correct or not is an example of using language politically (Joseph, 2006). Interpreting so is the indicator of the social hierarchy, which shows who is in the power and how he/she will use language to achieve their aims. That is, linguistic authority is a powerful social force and can be used to show the social hierarchy depending on the power taken from being an authority (Joseph, 2006). Another example of the political use of language is to define what is rational and to classify people in a society (Joseph, 2006). In other words, language is used to set criteria of being or removing a member of the society. These are ways to manipulate people or to manifest one's superior knowledge. For example, interruptions to a person's speech are a way to manipulate and show one's superiority to his/her interlocutor. They may result in the use of language to establish and assess one's social status relative to one another. Therefore, these processes require choosing a language, which is political because it depends on and determines the relationship between speakers and a wrong choice may have some sanctions (Joseph, 2006). It is a common situation in post-colonial countries in which they have an indigenous language and imperial one. They also have the problem of deciding which language to use as the language of education and trade. That situation violates language (linguistic) rights and leads to linguistic imperialism. In this issue (choosing the language),

policing the language is a necessary step. According to Joseph, policing the language includes:

- deciding the form of the language in terms of standardness of accent, vocabulary, and lexicon,

- deciding the borders of the language – what is and is not in the language,

- defining thought expressed in the language,

- providing a sense of social order,

- keeping the language under control.

Policing is a way to persuade people to think in a similar way that the ones in power think. Propaganda is a good way to understand how people are directed to think in a way that their government wants them to think and how they behave accordingly (Joseph, 2006). Choosing and policing language are related directly to national identity. That is because language is the repository of meaning and cultural memory of a nation (Joseph, 2006). The best example is the rebirth of Hebrew that was a dead language before Israel was founded, but with the encouragement of the language by the state as it is the language of a nation, it survived and revived (Joseph, 2006). This creates a strong sense of nationhood. The French language policy for immigrants is another example. It aims to make the children of those families develop a sense of being French by forcing parents of those children to speak French at home because it is believed that if they speak their native languages at home, they will develop some sub-cultures which will avoid them being a part of French culture (Joseph, 2006). It seems that the notion of national identity may be oppressive, but if it is kept within bounds, it is a positive force that gives people a sense of who they are, creates connectedness in their lives, and avoid them feeling alienated (Joseph, 2006). Choosing and policing a language result in the standardization of the language. For this, Joseph mentioned that Kloss in 1952 claimed that there are two criteria to standardize a language:

- **Abstand (distance):** It means that the dialect is distinctive in linguistic terms.

- **Ausbau (building out)**: It shows there is a certain amount of literary production and it includes a certain amount of standardization of spelling and grammar, learned words, and syntactic devices.

Writing in the standardization of language plays an important role because some languages have an oral tradition but not a writing system, which may cause language endangerment; however, if they have a writing system, they may be permanent. According to Joseph, the

creation of a writing version of the language may be political due to being interpreted as an invasion. This is because writing represents a cultural borrowing. The agreement of the writing system by the community may also create a political problem, which may fracture the community of language users (speech community) culturally because a minimally distinctive writing system may create a distinct national identity (Joseph, 2006). The standardization of a language makes it the language of which all other dialects become variants, regional uses, and misuses. Though a language is standardized, it is always changing, and this change has some political and social consequences. For example, speakers of languages are loyal to their languages and they try to protect and maintain them. They think that the language promotes the belief in the internal unity and their difference form other nations at knowledge level (Joseph, 2006). They are sensitive to misuse of the language, multilinguism, language change, and non-standard use. It is because the language is the place where culture's mental past and its present coherence are grounded (Joseph, 2006). These are interventions. The interventions cause change in the social structure and in the distribution of resources and responsibilities (Joseph, 2006). This shows how language becomes a cultural force. As it is seen, there is a direct link between language and identity of a society. Joseph listed the steps of forming a distinctive identity as follows:

- A cultural elite can perform ausbau tasks to transform the perception of falling standards into the recognition of a new language. It must be done through writing.
- If a critical mass of the educated and powerful within the identity-population accepts that knowledge can be held and transmitted safely in the new language, its status will become secure. That acceptance is a matter of persuasion and rhetoric, which is directly related to the political status of the language.

1984 by George Orwell is an example to the use of language to build a nation by changing the way people think and perceive the world by changing the language being used. In the book, Orwell created an imaginary country where there is a totalitarian society and where the government tries to control both the behavior and the thoughts of the people. To control them, it uses some ways, and one of them is the newly created language, Newspeak. The language is standardized in a way to meet the needs of the regime. The government forces people to use Newspeak by lessening their use of Oldspeak (old language). Newspeak aims to provide the medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits by avoiding other ways of thinking. It also aims to make Oldspeak incomprehensible. To achieve its aims,

the vocabulary of Newspeak is reconstructed in such a way that the government could wish to express by avoiding creating other meanings. This is done by reinventing words and omitting undesirable ones.

To sum up, politics is related to power and uses the language for the following purposes:

- to make decisions

- to control resources

- to control others' behaviors

- to control values

- to influence thoughts.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is mentioned above that culture plays an important role in connecting and uniting people through creating a common sense among those people. This common sense is based on the combination of moral and material living styles that they have formed living together for long years. As a result, different components such as religion, war, historical heritage, morality, and literature make up culture. Those components need language to be created and to be passed on from one generation to other generation. That is, it is the language that creates and reflects culture by creating its components. Through language, a society creates its social structure by forming values, norms, and social control. The values and norms, together with social control, control and organize the individuals and groups in the society so that the society unites, protects and maintains its existence. However, there are many kinds of language such as regional dialects, group languages, and functional languages in a society. If there is not a common and standard language among those groups in the society, it may threaten the unity of that society because without a common language there may be breakdowns in producing, maintaining, and passing on the culture. This may result in the loss of connectedness to each other. Therefore, one dialect of a language should be chosen as a standard language by applying to the criteria that İmer (1990) mentioned. That standard language should have a coding system that makes it permanent and should be the language of science. Also, it should combine all other kinds of languages in a linguistic society, differ its users from other users of different languages, be prestigious, and help its users to understand the world around them, so their users are loyal to that language and want to use and protect it. That is, a standard language creates a cultural and linguistic awareness in a society. With the help of that standard language, children start to learn the linguistic behaviors of their societies

at home and at school (İmer, 1990). Those linguistic behaviors enable children to learn and experience their culture, so they become a member of that culture or system. In this part, children also learn the way their societies perceive the world and the way they live because each society has a different living style, and their language reflects those different living styles according to Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Ünalan, 2002). It is a process and develops in a parallel way to the societies' living styles. In other words, a language helps people understand the world and one another by creating a uniquely communal and individual means (Kramsch, 1998). The whole process enables individuals and groups to form their cultural identity through language, so they can create their own societies to which they are closely connected and for which they unite and try to protect and maintain their culture. At this point, the effect of politics on language is seen because a group in power in the society chooses a language and determines how it is going to be standardized as it happens in Orwell's novel. This process can affect the way people consider themselves in relation to others in the society, the way they form and speak their thoughts, the way they perceive the world, and the way they communicate with each other. Choosing and policing a language are also politically in a close relation with the formation of a nation in that standardizing a language involves forming the ausbau of the language through writing, which creates a distinctive nationality with a unique understanding of the world and unique culture that formed depending on the language.

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