Society's Impact: Language Loss, and the Erosion of Essence

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An old woman walks into a house excited to see her grandson's children for the first time. Having traveled thousands of miles; she is ushered to a sofa, and her grandson's children come forth speaking indistinguishably. The grandmother responds by saying, "Look how cute you are!" The children look at each other and then continue speaking in the same confusing way as before. The children's mother asks her husband if he remembers how to speak Polish. "No, but I can understand grandma just fine. She has lived with my aunt, and after mom and dad left Poland, I never needed to use Polish. Besides, mom and dad wanted me to have a good future in America so they encouraged me to use English as much as possible. I don't know how we will communicate, but at least she will be comfortable since I can understand her." he murmurs in an undertone to his wife. The great grandmother tries to communicate with the children, but eventually settles with enthusiastic tones and gestures; happily contented with the fact that she is able to see and play with them. As she sits playing with her great grandchildren; she looks at her grandson and thinks of how sad it is that her great grandchildren will never understand the language in their blood. As their eyes meet, the father's heart echoes his grandmother's.

Lai Yu-Tung (2009) describes language loss as, "the loss or deterioration of competence in one's first or second language" (p. 10). Language loss is the process that occurs when a heritage language, a language that previous generations spoke as an L1, is no longer known within the descendants of that family. Research on "language death has focused on subtractive bilingualism" (Priven, 2008, p. 99). Though subtractive bilingualism can be a process that occurs in and during language loss, it slightly differs in certain ways. Bournot-Trites, Tellowitz, and Ulrike (2002) postulate that in the process of subtractive bilingualism; the second language ultimately replaces the first language. In the process of becoming proficient in an L2, a person's L1 skills diminish to the point that they are not functional for communication. Subtractive bilingualism usually occurs in a particular person's life, while language loss is the finalized product of individuals, groups, families, or communities losing their heritage language. But it is not only subtractive bilingualism that leads to language loss.
In most cases, language loss afflicts immigrants and refugees who are beginning to live their lives in a new country, and often in a new culture. As America resettles the most refugees per year, and is a welcoming host to immigrants, it is important to note the United States and its society's role in language attrition. Research implicates the “…United States as a ‘graveyard’ for foreign languages” (Tran, 2010, p. 260). Priven (2008) expands on this by exclaiming that though all generations of immigrants are in danger of losing their language, the most vulnerable to language loss are children (p. 95). Children are most susceptible due to a variety of reasons. Perhaps, according to Nesterak, “Their parents have made a decision not to burden them with their heritage language so that they can focus on English only” (2010, p. 281). This could be seen as a means to aid children to be successful in their new environment. But, parents are not the only factors that put children at risk for language attrition: Pavlenko (2003) expresses that American society has justify language loss in the past with the following: “…languages are not equal in theoretical, practical, and moral values, and that it is necessary to protect American youth from languages that could ‘contaminate’ them…” (p. 319). Unfortunately, this mindset, established from fears during World War I, still permeates American society in trace amounts. As seen when Guardado (2006) indicates that, “…schools and society also put emphasis on the dominant language, which causes the children to lose features of their L1” (p. 52). Schools and society put pressure on students to assimilate into the dominate culture while legislation within the American government also seeks to reinforce social concepts of intolerance with pro-English legislation.

No Child Left Behind discourages quality heritage language programs, and current societal ideologies bashing immigrants and favoring English-only policies create a hostile environment where individuals who maintain and use their native languages are often viewed as un-American (Wright, 2010, p.141)

As outside forces are pushing immigrant and refugee students to assimilate and complete the process of language loss, students themselves may feel that their language ability is not acceptable in society. Nesteruk (2010) argues that students who speak another language may find their ability to be a source of embarrassment (p. 283). Not only do the students endure social pressures to assimilate, they themselves may have crippling concepts about how to fit in. Over time it is natural for immigrant children to come to the realization that “…English is becoming, or has become, their first language, the language of their peers, their school, their country - and their lives” (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 285).

Pavlenko (2003), states that in the past, dialogue suggested that language maintenance and bilingual immigrant education would destabilize the nation (p. 320). The following is a clear example of this philosophy:

...To give instruction in French to children of French Canadians, in German to those of German inheritance, or in Swedish to the Swedish born, is to keep up the barriers we want to throw down, and until our population is more homogène, more one in speech and ideals, it is probably better to banish all foreign languages… (Fitz-Gerald, p.11-12, as cited in Pavlenko, 2003, p. 320).
This concept of unity is reinforced in the home by parents who want their children to succeed in their new life, as Guardado (2006) explains, “…[parents] seemed to be aware of the assimilative forces that schools and the wider community exert on minorities in general and on their families in particular” (p. 67). In an effort to help their children unify with the host country and be successful many parents will encourage the process of language loss.

In my own life I have seen this process at work. S. Zhivago, who immigrated into the US from Russia, can speak Russian. But, as he moved to America as a young teenager, his ability in his L1 is nowhere near the level of his older siblings. It is also important to note that his youngest brother, who was born in the United States, has even less command of the family’s heritage language. As such, his younger brother is dominant in the family’s L2; English, even though this is technically his L1. Within the family the lines between L1 and L2 are blurred for its members. Even though S. Zhivago can understand spoken Russian he has trouble speaking it. As a result, should he have children the passing of his L1 would be near impossible because he cannot produce his heritage language for his children. Tran, (2010) reinforces this concept by postulating that, “Frequent use of a language is by far the best way to promote and retain it” (p.278). As S. Zhivago will not be able to use Russian in a completely communicative way, it is more than likely that he and his future children will participate in the process of language loss. As they may not be exposed to their heritage language as a means of communication they cannot reclaim bilingualism. But S. Zhivago is not the only one who I personally know that has or will endure this deplorable process.

L. Nakamura was born in America, but his parents were immigrants from Japan. As a child L. Nakamura spoke Japanese solely and would have been considered a native speaker of Japanese. When he went to school, his native language was crushed and stripped from him. Through language therapy and general disrespect for his heritage language, his English-only ESL teachers successfully completed the process of making L. Nakamura a victim of subtractive bilingualism. Though L. Nakamura lived near a large Japanese community and his parent spoke exclusively in Japanese, he could not retain his heritage language. His parents were influenced by the mainstream thoughts of society at the time, and they thought it was better for him to focus on English. But years later, L. Nakamura mourned the fact that he could not speak to his grandmother or extended family that still lived in Japan. Through a lot of hard work he relearned Japanese to a lower advanced level. It is a sad situation since L. Nakamura could have already had fluency in Japanese, had the ESL teachers of old not stripped him of his birthright.

Since so many factors are causing students to lose their ability in their L1, Tran (2010) asserts that “Language assimilation was conceptualized as a one-way process whereby members of immigrant ethnic groups acquired English and abandoned their mother tongue with the endpoint being English monolingualism” (p.260). This conceptualization urges Nesteruk (2010) to attest that18 year old bilinguals are rare (p.272).

When children lose the ability to communicate effectively in their L1, the process of language loss continues to spiral out of control. Priven (2008) suggests that when this happens, parents find that their children cannot express themselves fully in their L1, and have to resort to
codeswitching, codemixing, and borrowing (p.95). Wardhaugh (2006) explains code-switching as a process where a speaker may “switch from one code [language] to another or to mix codes even within sometimes very short utterances and thereby create a new code” (p. 101). As this form of communication becomes the norm, the reliance on the L1 to communicate becomes less and less resulting in subtractive bilingualism and ultimately language loss.

Even though it seems to be an unavoidable process, there are measures that can be taken to prevent language loss. As society can be a factor to cause language loss, so too can it be a means of maintaining it. “…keys to language maintenance include the close proximity of speakers and the existence of the mother-tongue institutions” (Wright, 2010, p.134). It is hard for people to lose their L1 when there are plenty of places to interact with it. Nesteruk (2010) suggests that a concentration of heritage social networks help immigrants find chances to use their native language, resulting in language maintenance (p. 273). Neighborhoods are a great place to continually keep a person’s L1 alive in a society that on a whole puts pressure on English only assimilation, but with children spending most of their time at school; schools themselves can become a means of protecting a child from language loss. “The availability of schools that are supportive of heritage language plays an important role in reinforcing parents’ efforts in the process of intergenerational language transmission” (Nesteruk, 2010, p.273). In summary Nesteruk (2010) stresses that the immigrant children and their families that have frequent opportunities to communicate in their L1 have a better rate of perpetuating it. (p. 274). Even though language loss is a possible outcome of societal assimilation, people have the choice to continue using their language, and “…the activists that matter most are grandparents and grandchildren, students and teachers, professors and poets” (Peacock, 2006, p.148). These people in the community can provide a rich learning environment that encourages and supports students’ maintenance of their heritage language. When there are many places to use their L1, there may not be so much pressure to assimilate to the degree of losing language. Moreover, immigrant or refugee children, who often suffer from feeling like an outsider, can interact in this heritage rich environment that they are natives of. They can keep one foot in their heritage culture, and one foot in their American culture.

But not all children and communities have a strong language community for their L1 to flourish in. When this is the case, keeping the L1 becomes even harder. In those cases though, Wright (2010) proposes that people should access institutions that teach the mother-tongue, or rely on the internet to keep in touch with their ancestral language (p.135). If access can be utilized from areas that are not in the community, the ability of maintaining a heritage language becomes more successful, and possibly indefinite.

Accessing resources of heritage language is a great practice, but it is also suggested that using the language at home is a critical aspect of protecting the loss of a language. Guardado (2006) states that “…a strong L1 identity is one of the most critical factors conductive to L1 maintenance” (p. 53). With a strong identity, those who speak the language of their culture will understand the importance of maintaining an L1 in an environment where an L2 is dominate, preferred, and encouraged. As Guardado (2006) suggests, the more culturally aware a person is, the more likely they will produce children with strong language ability and cultural attachment (p. 61).
By pairing L1 identity with the use of language in the home, it can be determined that the loss of language has a low margin. Nesteruk (2010) sees that “Language practice at home appears to be one of the strongest predictors of heritage language maintenance” (p. 273). If a language is spoken at home, and the L1 culture and language is understood to be an important aspect of a child’s life, then children in that situation will have a foundation of the language that becomes stronger as they seek resources to maintain their language ability. Without this support, the pressures of society, condemning their “Otherness” will take hold and dominate their ability to maintain their heritage language and possibly their heritage culture in a greater context.

While working at the Institute for Extended Learning (IEL) in Spokane, WA, I have spoken to two men who are from the same country. They both speak the same language, and they are both refugees who have lived in Spokane, WA for similar times. One man has his whole family; several siblings, his wife, children, and his parents. All together he has over three generations of people who speak his native language. He told me his children are learning English at school, but they continue to speak their L1 at home exclusively. I personally thought that was great to hear, because his children were able to maintain their heritage language in a society that seeks to promote English-only. Off handed comments such as “If you are going to live in America, speak American [English]!” are prevalent in the commoner’s speech pattern; something that they admitted to hearing on a daily basis from fellow society members. But, the other man only has his wife and his children. He does interact with people in the community who share the same L1 and culture, but he told me at home, his children have already started to use English more than their heritage language. Odds are, the children will understand their heritage language completely, but will not be able to produce it by the time they graduate high school. I told him to try and maintain the heritage language. He should fight to prevent language loss. But he told me that though he would like that, they are in America now, and they should be practical. I could understand his decision. He did not have generations of family with him, and so there was no need to maintain the language for the sake of others. Moreover, he would not be returning to the country of his ancestors. Surviving then meant integration into American society, having the language ability to understand his environment, and working to keep his family healthy and happy. It was right for him to help his children cultivate an American identity. What better way than starting with the language. Survival in an English dominated society, regardless of pressure, also seems to be a means to encourage language loss on a practical level. If an L1 is not used nor needed, the L2 will, as a means of survival, become dominate.

Maintaining a heritage language can be hard in a country where the L2 is dominant. As children face an abundance of resistance to maintaining their heritage language, parents must be fierce in their resolve to undertake the passing on of their heritage language. Nesteruk (2010) advocates that children can grow up bilingual if their parents make intentional efforts to teach their native language on a daily basis (p. 283). With a dominant L2, osmosis of the heritage language will not occur. Therefore parents will have to continually aid in the maintenance of their children’s heritage language to prevent language loss and subtractive bilingualism. In summary, “…on a daily basis, immigrant parents have to wrestle not to slide into convenient English themselves and
to remind their children to speak their heritage language” (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 283). This process does not have to be overbearing for the children, but it is surely important for parents to stay ever vigilant in their efforts to prevent language loss. Despite the effort needed to maintain their heritage language, the final outcome will be well worth it, for the ability to communicate in more than one code can enrich a person’s life on many levels.

In the end, language is a tool: a tool that can open doors to unknown and sacred places. If we allow society and its corrosive power to enforce language loss, our tool will dull; and in time, when we need the aid of the tool again; we will only have the husk of a shell, or a fleeting memory, of what was once; but shall never be again.

References


