

Linguistic Identity Construction of Shina Speakers: An Ethnographic Study

Shamim Ara Shams

PhD Candidate, English, National University of Modern Languages
Islamabad, Pakistan. Email; shamim.shams@kiu.edu.pk

Zia Ul Haq Anwar

Assistant Professor, Linguistics & Literature, Karakoram International
University Gilgit, Gilgit, Pakistan.

Abstract

The present research intends to investigate the linguistic identity construction of Shina speakers in different contexts. The objective of the study is to study the pure Shina identity and to see how language use varies according to context. An ethnographic study was conducted to find out how Shina speakers construct their linguistic identities in different contexts. The sample for this research was purposive which included multilingual Shina speakers and the data was collected through interviews. The data was analyzed using Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton (1993). The findings of the study revealed that multilingual Shina speakers construct their linguistic identity in their interaction through code-switching and code mixing. It was found that a pure Shina identity is constructed at home and in close circles whereas a hybrid identity is constructed at the work place and formal context.

Key Words

Identity construction,
language, multilingualism

Introduction

This research study is being undertaken to investigate the identity construction of Shina speakers who live in the mountainous region of the Northern Pakistan. Identity is a relative and multi-faceted term which varies according to the contexts of questioning. It is common to take on a national identity when one is outside the country such as Pakistani, Indian and American, while within one's country, regional, linguistic, ethnic or political affiliations often delimit one's identity. Carla and Backetstrom (2002) suggest that the closer one gets to home, the narrower the classification, until clan or family names can be given to answer questions of identity.

The language we speak and the way it is being spoken determines our identity. Zamfir (2014) suggests that language plays an important role in identity construction and people propagate their identities through communication patterns. Torwali (2019) is of the view that in this age of globalization, new identities are being constructed based on languages, ethnicities and religions which are affecting different societies across the globe. In case of multilingual participants, the language choice depends on identity negotiation, construction and indication of connection and solidarity with individuals or groups.

The Shina speaking community is one of the biggest speech communities in Gilgit-Baltistan. It has its own culture which is full of ethnic and dialectical diversity. The language of the people is called Shina which is one of the most widely spoken languages of Gilgit-Baltistan having its culture and literature orally transferred from generation to generation. The culture of the Shina speakers is dying out as until now it does not have an approved orthography system to preserve its cultural heritage in written form. The loss of the culture of Shina speakers will entail the loss of their identity. In the past, different moral and cultural traits were taught to the young generation through folk songs, sayings and other folklore. The folk lore was the only tool of instruction for the young generation to teach moral values of the society as in the past there were no conventional schools in this mountainous region.

Schmidt and Kohistani (2008), while describing the identity of the Shina speakers in the Northern Pakistan are of the view that Shina speakers often refer themselves by a geographical destination where they live such as Chilasi, Gilgiti, Khohistani. Carla (2002) suggests that due to the geographical barriers such as rivers and mountains and limited communication of the inhabitants with the outside world, the identity of the Shina speakers is geographically oriented. Shaped by the historical and political forces, the Shina language is spoken by different ethnic groups and tribes in the region. Therefore, it is not surprising that few people define their identity solely by speaking a common language; yet the speaking of Shina is definitely an integral part of their identity.

Language is a central part of culture and members of a particular community construct or propagate their identity through their language. In the present research, the researcher has used the ethnographic method to study the identity construction of Shina speakers. In ethnographic research, researchers observe and interact with the participants of study in their real-life environment. According to Agar (1980), the term 'ethnography' refers to both a research method and the product of that research. It literally means a description of people which actually deals with people collectively not individually. It is a way of studying people in organized, bigger groups which may be referred to as societies or communities. The distinctive way of life that characterizes such a society or community is its culture which includes shared behaviors, customs, beliefs and the languages they speak.

This research study holds importance as it investigates the identity construction of Shina speakers through an ethnographic approach. This research will discuss that how the identity of the Shina speakers is changing due to the influence of other languages on their mother tongue. Shina, like other oral languages, is dying out due to having no written script ultimately affecting the identity of the Shina speakers. This study focuses its attention on how the identity of the multilingual Shina speakers is constructed through their social communications. The study presupposes that Shina is a system of dialogue or discourse and is an integral part of the identity construction of the Shina speakers. The diverse culture of this area provides a unique opportunity for researchers, social scientists and anthropologists to study the cultural evolution and ethno linguistics.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate linguistic identity construction of multilingual Shina speakers
2. To find out the factors that affect identity construction

Research Questions

1. How do multilingual Shina speakers project their linguistic identities during interaction?
2. Which factors play a role in the identity construction of multilingual Shina speakers?

Literature Review

Studies have been carried out on identity construction in different parts of the world. Social scientists are of the view that language plays a vital role in identity construction and in multilingual contexts; speakers consciously or unconsciously mix different languages according to different contexts and roles (Rusi, 2014; Schneider, 2011; Sharifian, 2009). Romaine (1989) discussed the impact of bilingualism or multilingualism on identity construction of speakers. Doley (2013) explored the marked and unmarked choices in the code-switching for the purpose of business in India. Radloff and Backstorm (1992) carried out a sociolinguistic survey of languages of Gilgit-Baltistan which is about the geographical location, dialects and a brief history of languages of Northern Areas which includes the languages such as Balti, Brushaski, Wakhi, Domaki and Shina.

Not many studies have been conducted on the culture and language of Shina speakers. The literature available on Shina comprises a handful of books written by the British political agents and writers during the era of Great Game in the region including Leitner (1893), Grierson (1924), Lorimer (1924), Baily (1924), Cunningham (1853) and Biddulph (1880). Shina was compared with other Dardic languages by Baily and Grierson. A general description of the language, history, culture and area was written by Biddulph (1880) and Leitner (1924). Ethnological studies on Shina include Muhammad (1905) and Lorimer (1924). Studies have also been conducted by Namus (1981), Kohistani and Schmidth (1998), Buddruss (1964), Dukhi (1995), Taj (2011) and Carla (2002). Biddulph (1924) was the first person to describe the geographical boundaries of the Shina language along with a detailed description of the culture and customs of the Shina speech community. He mentioned the areas of Gilgit River valley such as Mayon, Chaprot, Hindi or Hindi in Hunza river valley and Bagrote and Haramosh where the Gilgiti variety of the Shina is being spoken. Lorimer (1927) has mentioned that the Shina speech community live in the areas of proper Gilgit up to some twenty miles including Shakiot and Sherote near the Puniel boarder, down the Gilgit valley to its junction with the famous Indus river, at Nomal more than fifteen miles up the Hunza River, in different villages of Bagrote, Haramosh and Sai Nullah. Shina is one of the major languages in the administrative division of northern Pakistan called Gilgit-Baltistan. The majority of the Shina speakers live in Gilgit and Diamer divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan, with additional communities living in Baltistan and Ghizer districts. The Kohistan area of Khyber Pukhtunkhawa province also contains a major population of Shina speakers. Moreover, Shina speakers also live in the valleys on the Indian side of the Kashmir in Daras and Kargel areas (Carla, 2002). Biddulph (1880) suggests that Leitner was the first foreigner to bring into prominent notice the existence of an Aryan race of great ethnological interest in the remote valleys of northern Pakistan. Besides Leitner, Biddulph's own report, 'The Tribes of

Karakoram' stands as a classical standard for description of the Shina speakers, their language, customs, traditions and areas of population. The study of culture includes in the investigation of the groups shared behavior, customs beliefs, traditions and of course their language. Biddulph (1880) used an ethnographic approach to study the culture and languages of the Shina speakers and other tribes and groups living in the northern part of Pakistan in late nineties.

Research Methodology

For the present research, the ethnographic method has been used as the language studies are an integral part of culture. Data has been collected through interviews. This ethnographic study has been conducted in Gilgit which is the administrative capital of Gilgit-Baltistan and home of the Shina speaking people. Shina is a major language in the political division of Northern Pakistan which is known as Gilgit-Baltistan. The majority of the Shina speakers live in Gilgit and Diamer division. The Shina dialect being spoken in Gilgit city is considered the standard dialect of Shina. The research participants of the study include educated native Shina speakers having proficiency in Urdu and English. The Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton (1993) has been used as a theoretical framework for data analysis.

Construction of the Pure Shina Identity

In order to study the relationship between language and identity and to find out how multilingual Shina speakers construct their identity in different contexts, the researcher started by asking questions regarding the variety of Shina used by the Shina speakers to which majority of them responded that their Shina language is influenced by other languages in their linguistic repertoire. They also shared that they use Shina with their family, friends and even sometimes at workplace which is a marked choice. When probed about the reasons for doing so, they talked about their emotional attachment with their mother tongue as they said that through Shina they can easily connect with closed ones. Shina is their mother tongue so they feel good while using it. This discourse indicates that the projection of pure Shina identity is preferred with family and friends.

According to the unmarked choice maxim of Markedness Model, it indicates that Shina is the unmarked choice with family and friends. The use of the expression 'even sometimes' while referring to the use of Shina at the workplace indicates their realization that Shina is a marked choice at the workplace. In order to know whether Shina speakers are rigid or flexible about their identity the researcher put the question, "is language a consideration for marriage?" In response to the question related to language being a consideration for marriage one of the respondent shared that for him it is not a consideration but people around him do consider it. He replied in the negative when asked about the inclusion of someone who knows Shina or has learned it in the Shina community on the pretext that his food, culture, home environment and conduct with other community members will be different. According to hierarchy of identities model (Omoniyi, 2007), it indicates that while considering anyone as a member of the Shina community, Shina identity is foregrounded and the linguistic identities of Urdu and English speakers are back-grounded.

In order to know the level of affiliation with Shina language, respondents were also asked to describe their reactions towards losing their mother tongue. The spontaneous reaction of the respondent was, "loss of mother tongue is loss of identity". They also shared the apprehension that, "our culture is in danger and our language is going to be diminished". This discourse indicates that Shina speakers ardently take Shina as a symbol of their identity and losing Shina is equated with losing culture and they are fearful of it. In response to the next question, they called Urdu the most important language. Contradiction is found here as on one hand they are worried about the future of Shina and believe that losing Shina would mean the loss of their identity. On the other hand the status of the most important language is given to Urdu. When asked about the reasons, they explicated that Urdu can widen their social circle whereas Shina is confined to the Shina community. This shows their realization about the fact that for utilitarian and practical purposes other languages are important whereas the apprehensions regarding the future of Shina reflect their emotional attachment with their mother tongue. When seen from the perspective of identity, it shows that the linguistic identity of a Shina speaker is dear to them but the linguistic identity of an Urdu speaker is more important as according to one of the respondents, "most of the time most of the people of my country speak and communicate in Urdu". They called the languages other than Shina as second languages.

One of the other respondents considered language as central to Shina identity but found it difficult to define Shina identity as "we are the people.....various identities". This discourse directly refers to the multiple identities maxim according to which people can negotiate multiple identities when there is no unmarked identity. She further explicated that our culture, life style, culture, language and clothes are different. She also shared apprehensions about the extinction of culture and identity as, "Our culture and language is wiping out from the society."

In response to the question related to the purity of Shina, a native speaker of Shina answered that she cannot speak pure Shina and picks most of the words from Urdu and English. She shared that she also uses Shina with friends. This indicated that Shina is preferred in close circles. This discourse provides an example of deference maxim according to which Shina is used to reduce distance and to indicate intimacy. In class she tries to use English but outside with friends she uses Urdu and Shina. This sounds interesting as it drives our attention towards the contextual construction or switching of identity as in class she projects an educated or formal identity of an English speaker but outside the class with the same people she constructs a mixed Urdu and English identity. In other words according to the Markedness Model, she establishes a formal set of rights and obligations in class and a mixed set of rights and obligations outside the class by blending the national and the international identity. According to the hierarchy of identities model, the linguistic identity of an English speaker is foregrounded in class. In formal contexts, in classroom, while presenting or discussing something, she uses English. In informal context she always uses Shina language and then switches to Urdu. She shared that it is necessary for one's spouse to use the same language as it is the medium through which people understand each other. She referred to Urdu as the national language and to English as a second language. She further said that the most important language for her is English as she is a student of English Department. She opined that language and culture are interconnected and losing Shina will mean losing our culture. On one hand she wanted Shina to survive as her culture is dear to her, on the other hand, she did realize the importance of English in the market and the low prestige of Shina. According to hierarchy of identities model, it indicates that in the linguistic market English is ranked high and Shina as having lower prestige.

The next respondent shared that he can speak four languages. He can speak Shina, Urdu, English and Brushaski but his mother tongue is Shina. He learned Brushaski at an early age from his friends. He said that he cannot claim to speak pure Shina as his language is intermixed due to unconscious usage of Brushaski words. He did not consider speaking the same language a consideration for marriage. According to him community will consider someone who knows Shina language as a member of Shina community but there will be a Difference as his accent will indicate that he does not belong to the area. He called languages other than Shina, to be second languages. He considers Shina the most important language for him. He also showed a concern regarding the influence of powerful languages on Shina as this is influencing Shina's lexicon as: "I would love to give more importance to my mother tongue". According to him if we lose Shina we will shift to other language like Urdu and English. This would lead to the death of our mother tongue and our cultural language. When probed further about the possible effects of it he opined that resultantly we will not have any cultural identity and we will become any other person. He considered language as central to Shina identity. He defined Shina identity as a person who speaks Shina, wears '*choga*' (a long coat) and a local hat. The term '*Gilgiti*', according to him, refers to all the people belonging to this region and not only to Shina speakers.

One of the multilingual Shina speakers was of the view that due to the job requirements, he uses different languages in different contexts and roles. He started his response in English and said that he cannot speak pure Shina and right after saying that switched to Urdu as:

"However laikin hota hay yay jo hay na unintentionally alfaz atay hein ya yay kay we come to a shortage of a language us smay wahe alfaz nahe milray hotay shina may to hamein ya to switch karna hota hay to won a jo hamein thought ko un tak pohancha nahe paray hotay covey nahe karsaktay".

[When we are unable to find an appropriate lexical item in one particular language we pick it from the other available languages.]

This very discourse is an amalgamation of Urdu and English, the essence of which is that we insert words from other language due to non-availability of lexical items in one's language. He accepted that he uses Shina outside his home as he feels that he can express himself better in Shina. This is interesting as he seems a competent bilingual but while expressing feelings he finds it easy to express himself in Shina. This strengthens the finding of the questionnaires that Shina is preferred to express emotions and feelings. The medium he used to express his thoughts is English which is similar to the findings of the analysis of the situations that English is used when people need their opinion to be heard and to be taken as important and valuable.

In his point of view, speaking the same language is necessary for both marriage partners as it is important for cultural affinity. He will not consider anyone a member of his community who has learned Shina. He considered English a foreign language and Urdu the national language. English is given the status of the most important language by him and the reason he gave is that all intellectual discourses are in English and it is a global language. This is quite interesting as on one hand he shared that to express his culture and identity, Shina is important and even at the workplace he feels the need to speak Shina but on the other hand he gave the status of the most important language to English due to utilitarian reasons. According to him, the loss of mother tongue will mean loss of culture, loss of history and loss of identity. This indicates that Shina propagates the personal or pure identity of the Shina speakers. On the other hand, they give more importance to English due to the benefits it offers.

According to him, language as well as culture and norms are central to Shina identity. While defining Shina identity he suggested that it refers to the areas where Shina is spoken and the term Gilgiti refers to the residents of Gilgit not specifically only Shina speakers.

Discussion

Several main questions characterized the objectives and design of this research study on identity construction of the Shina speakers. The basic underlying question, of course was, how do multilingual Shina speakers project their linguistic identities during interaction?

- The detailed analysis of the data revealed that the multilingual Shina speakers do not have any ethnic identity. The Shina speakers of Gilgit only have the linguistic identity. In the absence of any ethnic identity the Shina speakers have become very much attached and sensitive about their linguistic identity as almost all of the respondents shared that they have or will prefer to marry the same language speaker. This is similar to Fishman (1998) that mother tongue is used to index emotion, intimacy and identity.
- Most of the respondents shared apprehensions regarding the future of Shina language and culture as most of them were of the opinion that loss of Shina would mean loss of identity and they would not like that to happen at any cost. This indicated that it is the linguistic identity of a Shina speaker which gives him a feeling of connectedness and his very existence.
- Most of the respondents considered Shina language as central to Shina identity which becomes even more important in the absence of any ethnic identity. Few of the respondents also considered food and dress as central to Shina identity.
- The analysis of the data concludes that Shina speakers ardently want to preserve the linguistic identity of Shina speakers due to the strong bond of affiliation with their mother tongue but they are able enough to ascertain the myriads of benefits offered by the linguistic identity of an English speaker due to which most of the respondents gave the status of the most important language to English.

Conclusion

The study was undertaken to find out how Shina speakers construct their linguistic identities during conversations with multiple languages at their disposal. The phenomenon of identity construction is a versatile and complex process. In the simplest words, it is a sense of belonging to a particular category, culture, ethnic or linguistic group, clan, region or a nation. The culture of the Shina speakers is on the verge of extinction. The loss of the culture of Shina speakers will entail the loss of their identity. The main objective of the study was to investigate the identity construction of Shina speakers. The study found that Shina speakers have three languages in their linguistic repertoire i.e. Urdu, English and Shina. They utilize these varieties creatively in a number of ways. Shina speakers construct a pure Shina identity at home, with parents, siblings and close friends. They also manage to create some space for creating pure Shina identity in informal contexts at the different workplaces. Also in informal contexts, pure Shina identity is foregrounded by the Shina speakers.

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