

Breaking the Barriers: The Construction and Deconstruction of Language

In the 2019 winter semester I had the opportunity to be a part of the Interdisciplinary Dialogue Project (IDP) at MacEwan University. The IDP consists of a series of educational forums given by experts that students can attend in order to explore and learn more about topics relating to social (in)justice and diversity. This year's IDP was comprised of topics regarding Indigenous peoples and their culture. As an important part of the program, I had to choose three topics that I found the most interesting as well as discuss them with other MacEwan students. There were several topics that were analysed: *Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being in Our Community*, *Indigenous Perspectives on Research*, and *Seeking Truths Through Respectful, Reciprocal Relationships*.

One of the topics I found fascinating was *Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being in Our Community*. Within this topic, however, there was a subtopic that resonated with me. That topic was *Language and its construction and deconstruction*. I identified with Darin Keewatin's¹ explanation about how Indigenous peoples have to deconstruct the English language, meaning they have to break it down into words and their meanings, and then reconstruct it in their brain to be able to make sense of the input they are receiving. This made me think about my own experience as an immigrant in this country and some of the challenges that I have had to face when it comes to language. One such challenge is taking notes in class, especially as a non-native speaker. When I am in class, I write things down as fast as I can and pay attention to key words that my professors say, even if I do not fully understand what they are saying yet. As I am doing this, my brain is deconstructing the meaning of such words so that I can understand, for

¹ Darin Keewatin was one of the guest speakers in the IDP series.

the most part, what is going on in class. Later on, as I am rewriting my notes, I also try to reconstruct the meaning of the ideas or explanations professors gave in class. Sometimes I even write the main ideas in Spanish because that is the only way my brain can process the information at that moment, and then translate them into English later. However, even though I am way better at thinking and expressing myself in English now, I still struggle with doing so at times.

Kramsch defines the 'subject' as 'an entity that is constituted and maintained by symbolic systems such as language' (17). Darin also mentioned that because of this very reason, Indigenous peoples also have a harder time making meaningful connections to this country. But if you really think about it, how can you feel connected to something that you do not understand, nor that people (e.g., native English speakers) help you understand either? As an immigrant and non-native English speaker myself, I find this to be true as well. People here (native English speakers) sometimes expect you to understand English in its entirety and do not try to make it easier to understand or empathize with how difficult it can be for a non-native speaker. It feels like they expect me to know everything just because I live here. The problem is that they probably do not think about how hard it is to want to express yourself fully in a language that you do not feel connected to.

For most immigrants, we are taught from a very young age that we should learn a second language, especially English, because it will open up better opportunities financially.

Monica Heller explains that "the very globalization processes which brings outsiders into competition with insiders also open up the economic opportunities which attribute value to bilingual linguistic resources, since it is all about serving a national and international market" (489). However, most immigrants did not learn English because we were interested in it or even

wanted to, per se. It was more of an imposition rather than something we voluntarily or willingly wanted to do. For most immigrants, learning and speaking English is seen as a tool rather than something you do for pleasure.

Celeste Kinginger states that

the subject is not given, but must be ‘constructed against the backdrop of natural and social forces that both bring it into being and threaten to destroy its freedom and autonomy’. When the multilingual subject goes abroad for the purpose of language learning, he or she is likely to encounter a new, and occasionally confounding backdrop whose natural and social forces are often unfamiliar (2),

Sadly, where I come from (El Salvador), Indigenous languages are almost completely gone and forgotten because no one sees the value in speaking the languages of our ancestors anymore. People would rather learn English than Nahuatl² because it becomes a skill that they can use to improve their lives; they do not seem to care to explore their roots or connect to them.

According to the sociolinguistic tradition, *language* is a key factor in constructing an identity. Language and culture almost always go hand in hand. At the same time, the good of the first precedes the second, but the deterioration of one, is a symptom of weakness of the other (María-José Azurmendi, Iñaki García, & Txelu González 4). For instance, when I moved here, I started hanging out with people who were very different than me, culture-wise. I had to speak English all the time and pretty much adopt a new culture, because the jokes and things I usually talked about were not common here. Even some things about the language itself were a little different: I learned American English and when I moved here, I was a little shocked when I was

² Nahuatl: A language or group of languages of the Uto-Aztecan language family.

exposed to certain words. For example, I remember when I made my first Canadian friend and she invited me over to her house for dinner. I vividly remember her saying “do you want to come over for *supper*?” And I was like “what? What do you mean by *supper*”? And then she said, “*supper*... you know... *dinner*.” That was when I finally understood what she meant. Small things, like multiple words with the same meaning, can make huge differences for non-native speakers.

I still spoke Spanish at home with my family, but it was not the same. Eventually, I started speaking Spanish less and began to feel like my identity was being altered in some way, culturally speaking. Essentially, a person’s identity is linked to the language(s) they speak, as well as their culture, and it is this interplay between the two that create an amorphous system that is never constant and continuously shaped by economic, social, and political forces.

Additionally, it is through language that we communicate with all kinds of people: family, friends, coworkers, etc. But the way in which we talk to each other changes depending on the person we are talking to. For example, people may swear more often and be more informal when they are talking to their friends compared to when they are speaking to their parents or a professor. Hence, in the same manner, speaking a second language allows us to fluctuate between facets of our core identity. As Azurmendi, García, and González claim, the term self-identity determines the cognitive representations that define a person; this is the way in which we structure our environment and the social categories that we identify with, thus defining our self-identity through our belonging to specific categories, which can be religious, political, and/or linguistic groups. For example, I feel like a slightly different version of myself when I am speaking English versus when I am speaking Spanish: I have to use different words, jokes are not the same, the way I express my feelings varies, and even when I talk about Psychology (my

major) to my family or Latin friends, I struggle because I do not know a lot of the terminology in Spanish. This struggle makes it very hard for me to get my points across most of the time, and is also a good example of reconstruction. Writing and presenting this paper at the Student Research Day (SRD) at Macewan this year is another example of reconstruction in my life. I had to translate everything I wanted to talk about from Spanish into English. That is the way it is for me because, as a native Spanish speaker, I automatically think in Spanish first. Even when I was reading articles that were in English pertaining to this topic, I had to deconstruct the messages that were in English into Spanish to understand them better and then translate everything back into English for the purposes of this presentation. In fact, having presented and spoken to so many people in the SRD was very challenging for me because although I speak English fairly well, I feel more comfortable speaking and expressing myself in my own language. It validates my identity as a person.

Personally, I believe this is also why Indigenous peoples and immigrants potentially fail to feel connected to a second language as well. They may feel forced to think and speak a language that is not meaningful to them. They cannot, nor should they, be expected to reshape their speech overnight, for habits of speech are rooted more deeply in a person's emotional and intellectual life than is generally realized. People may become frustrated because they cannot reconstruct language and therefore may also put up walls around them. These actions would only further contribute to the perpetuation of the vicious circle in which Indigenous peoples and Immigrants find themselves because they continue to feel like they do not fit into Canadian society.

I chose this topic in particular because I think it has a lot of implications. It is necessary for native English speakers to collaborate with Indigenous peoples as well as immigrants to

create a more inclusive environment for everybody. For instance, school wise, professors could try to speak slower, especially if they have a tendency to speak fast and avoid using complicated and technical words that students would not be familiar with, especially during the first academic years of their careers. As well, the implementation of workshops could be helpful to further educate and inform others about the challenges non-native English speakers face at university with the end goal of creating social awareness and empathy towards them. Furthermore, both Indigenous peoples and immigrants should also try to form meaningful connections to the English language through things like their jobs and/or careers, since such actions potentially allow them to grow as people and experience things from multiple perspectives.

References

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