

Research Article

A Few Notes on ‘Selfing’ and ‘Othering’ in Language

Aditi Ghosh

Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, Calcutta University, 87/1 College Street, Kolkata-700073, West Bengal
Email: aditi.gh@caluniv.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Though speech, in general understanding, is often seen as a mere carrier of information, a bridge that connects the minds of human beings, it is also a very common tool for constructing boundaries by constituting the concept of the self and the other. The division between different language communities and the deligitimisation of non-standard speech varieties within the same language community are such commonly witnessed phenomena. However, the construction of the language based boundaries does not depend only on the degree of linguistic difference itself. Instead, it is consistently dependent on the recognition and/or validation of the difference as being significant enough to construct categories. Often the most minor linguistic differences are instrumental in creating strikingly different categories and at other times the most glaring differences in language structures are left unnoticed and are inconsequential in construction of any such categories. This paper explores how speech creates such categories and how certain norms become significant in some social groups creating margins that exclude those who are incompatible with the set norms.

Keywords: Linguistic identities, Linguistic othering, Language ideology, Sociolinguistics, Linguistic exclusion

INTRODUCTION

A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live, remember you are a human being with divine gift of articulate speech you see this creature with her kerbstone English that will

keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well Sir, in three months, I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party.

Professor Higgins's disdain in *Pygmalion* (Shaw, 1913 /2005) with Eliza Dolittle's speech variety shows how speech can be a constitutive tool in classification of speakers and in creating mutually exclusive groups. To Professor Higgins, speaking a speech variety which does not meet the set norms endorsed by a group of elite high prestige speakers, is a serious enough offence to (in an exaggerated vein) question the speaker's right to life. Even though it is said flippantly, the speech of Eliza makes her an outsider for the group of people who can be a legitimate part of the "ambassadors' ball", and a change in the speech can pass her off into a "duchess" – the most coveted in-group member in the same event. The case of Professor Higgins is not an exception; rather his is a reflection of a most commonly encountered language attitude in almost every linguistic community. Language, whose primary purpose is communication, can also act as an effective divider. It may simultaneously function as a bridge and a wall. It does so by assigning values to languages and language varieties and creating in and out groups based on them.

One glaring example of speech based divisions can be demonstrated in the process of formation of different languages. When examined closely, it becomes apparent that differences in linguistic structure play a lesser-than-expected role in the creation of different languages. For example, if we examine the linguistic structure of Hindi and Urdu, we see that apart from lexical items the differences between the two languages are rather negligible. Similar lexical difference is quite commonly found in speech varieties that are classified as dialects of the same language. Yet these two are established beyond question as separate languages. This is primarily because through history these languages came to be representatives of two distinct groups of speakers representing different identities. A more detailed discussion of how languages are constructed by speakers as well as observers of language is discussed in the section entitled *Interlinguistic othering*. However, it may be emphasised here that boundaries that separate languages and by doing so create separate linguistic communities are far from either natural or linguistic. Though the general concept about language itself, however, often gives the false impression that there are clear cut, and preferably a gulf of a difference, between languages; what we have in reality is innumerable dialects blending into each other creating a never ending continuum. What constructs language, then, is the ideology of language.

Gal and Irvine (1995) in their seminal paper have shown how the language related ideology of the speakers as well as the observers of language plays a vital role in creating boundaries between languages by following three semiotic processes, i.e., iconicity – whereby one or a few linguistic features become representative of a group of speakers; recursiveness – whereby an opposition or a contrast is created

with the group in question and other groups; and erasure – a process through which all the features that are present but inconsistent with the ideological scheme of the language, is made invisible. It is important to note here, that these processes do not involve only the speakers of the languages. Those who use languages as well as those who study them, including the linguists, are responsible in the construction of what we see as different languages. Even if the languages are sufficiently similar from the linguistic point of view, it is the boundary created by ideological validation of ‘other’ that constitutes two distinct languages like Hindi and Urdu, whereas the linguistically different speech varieties form a single language.

Therefore, language, in more ways than one, can function effectively as a constitutive tool for excluding the “other” and creating the identity of the “self” in contrast with the “other”. This paper attempts to see some of the practices through which language constructs boundaries. As mentioned already such boundaries may construct groups with different language identities or it may create groups based on different varieties of the same language. Other than these discernible categories, language based selfing and othering may involve many unique language based categories, complex and dynamic language behaviour, and various conversational strategies. Some of these will be discussed in the following sections.

TYPES OF OTHERING

The studies on ‘otherness’ (cf., Bhaba, 1994; Hall, 1997; Said, 1978), though varied and diverse in nature, essentially argue that the construction of identity – be it cultural, national or linguistic – necessarily depends on the exclusion of another. Identity construction is an act of drawing boundaries and creating exclusion zones through the process of closure (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005, p. 672) and this process of othering, though based partly on discernible elements, is created largely by imposing subjective and socially constructed ideological significance on those elements. Said talked about the “ideas about the Orient . . . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient.” (Said, 1978, p. 5). One can borrow Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983) from national cultures to various language based cultures. In other words, the differences between the linguistic communities do not play any major role in the process of othering, till those differences recognised, endorsed and projected as significant. The language based othering is achieved by imposing social and cultural values on not only speeches and speech varieties but also on various localised language related practices, as it will be demonstrated in the following sections.

INTERLINGUISTIC OTHERING: OTHERING WITHIN A LANGUAGE BOUNDARY

The well known practices of othering within languages are easily observed in the othering of non-standard speakers. Almost everyone in a particular linguistic culture

agree that there is only one 'correct', 'better' and 'beautiful' variety that can validly represent the language (Milroy, 2001). As a consequence all the non-standard varieties and its speakers are ostracised as the undesirable, corrupted, invalid and are often subject to mockery and disdain. This attitude towards the "lesser" varieties of the same language quite pervasive and applicable to regional based varieties of any language known as dialect as well as to different social parameter based varieties which can be generally referred to as sociolects.

Any competent speaker of any language community is aware of the comparative social values of these different speech varieties. This attitude is observable in everyday life and is corroborated by research (cf. Garrett, Coupland, & Williams, 2003; Coupland & Bishop, 2007; Eckert, 2000). Coupland and Bishop's study shows a systematic evaluation of standard varieties as more attractive and/or prestigious in comparison with all other varieties paired with a consistent downgrading of regional / vernacular varieties. The study also shows that to some extent attitudes can be linked with the background of the informants. For example, the informants very frequently favoured their own linked varieties including their own regional varieties and rated those as attractive. This shows that in spite of the general prevalent system of low evaluation of non-standard varieties social meanings of such varieties can also arise out of locally relevant evaluations. One of the earliest instances of positive evaluation of local variety and an unconscious system of othering directed towards the 'high' variety and its speakers is found in Labov's (1972) study in Martha's Vineyard. The seminal study showed how language was used as a tool to create the 'us' and 'them' categories. The islanders' use of the local centralised diphthongs in words where the standard variety prescribes a non-centralised variation was an act of (unconsciously) ascertaining their 'islander' identity as distinct from those of the mainlanders who were disparagingly named 'summer people' indicating their limited time occupancy in the island.

This subjective value laden approach towards language varieties is not observed among common people alone. Linguists too have not been free from such judgements. Professor Higgins is a representative of his generation of linguists whose aim was to "rectify" the seemingly "insufferable" varieties of speech like the ones spoken by Eliza. Even later when the discipline of Linguistics adopted a more neutral and egalitarian approach to language, the linguists essentially worked within an ideological framework which delegitimises the analysis of any other variety than the standard (cf., Taylor, 1990; Joseph, 1990; Cameron, 1990; Milroy, 2001), excluding in effect all the other varieties of languages than the standard. This demonstration of apparent neutrality can be more damaging than observable value laden attitude of earlier linguistic enquiries. Joseph and Taylor (1990, p. 2) warns that '... any enterprise which claims to be non-ideological and value-neutral, but which covertly remains ideological and value-laden is more dangerous for its deceptive subtlety'.

By and large, it can be ascertained that different varieties of the same language are used often as tools of exclusion by imposition of subjective non-linguistic values on them for creating incompatible categories which shapes the attitudes of linguists and non-linguists alike.

INTER-LINGUISTIC OTHERING: OTHERING ACROSS LANGUAGES

As seen in the previous section, language varieties are often used as tools for exclusion by imposing social values on them. However, it should also be kept in mind that the concept of distinct languages itself is a value laden notion based on the ideology of separation, which has little linguistic basis.

The basic processes through which subjective non-linguistic issues become effective for creating mutually exclusive social groups within one language may also be effective in constructing similar exclusive groups among languages. The concept of distinct languages with clear lines clearly separating them is itself based on the ideology of distinct languages representing groups of human beings who can be unambiguously differentiated from each other on the basis of some definite symbols like language, religion, caste etc; when in reality, these symbols are far from fixed and unidimensional in nature. On the contrary, they are fluid, scalar and extremely dynamic. These symbols are interpreted and reinterpreted along the lines of the dominant ideology of time and place. In case of languages, it is often seen that the geographical varieties form an unending continuum, which resists giving in to any clearly distinctive lines to separate them. This makes finding lines that separate languages a colossal task and often defies any linguistic explanation. Besides, linguistic logic has little to do with grouping variations based on either geographical or social criteria, under one language community or assigning them to different language communities. The much offered and seemingly efficient criterion of mutual intelligibility – the concept that two dialects can be identified as parts of the same language if the speakers of those dialects are intelligible to each other – fails on many counts in grouping dialects as part of one language. First of all, the criterion is based primarily on the subjective affirmation of at least a sizeable portion of the speakers of the varieties in question. This may give rise to a number of potential problems. Speakers of a community may offer contradictory opinion about the intelligibility of a variety. There can be the problem of one way intelligibility. For example, it is reported that Polish speakers claim that they do not understand Russian where as the Russian speakers claim that they understand Polish. This is also true for most dominant and non-dominant language varieties. Speakers of dominant varieties, including the standard variety, often tend to claim that the marginal varieties are incomprehensible to them. Whereas speakers of marginal varieties, including peripheral, low prestige dialects, are inclined to say that they understand the dominant varieties. So in such cases, it would be practically impossible to establish a case of mutual intelligibility. Besides, there are also abundant

instances of numerous language varieties forming continuums, where the geographically adjacent varieties demonstrate a great deal of mutual intelligibility but the distant varieties end up as mutually unintelligible. Evidently, linguistically such varieties tend to merge into each other without any clear break. Again this makes attempt of drawing lines based on mutual intelligibility, or on the basis of any subjective language based criteria for that matter, exceedingly difficult. As a result of these, often similar language varieties are separated as different languages and different language varieties are grouped under same language. The second can be seen among some varieties of Chinese which are well accepted as parts of the same language even though they are mutually incomprehensible, mainly because they are spoken in the same political boundary and represented by the same script.

On the other hand, often the most linguistically similar varieties with high degrees of mutual intelligibility are considered as different languages. One can examine the examples of Thai and Lao or Hindi and Urdu. Thai and Lao both belong to the Thai-Kodai group of languages; they are mutually intelligible, and have similar linguistic features such as tonality. The only linguistic differences are that their scripts are slightly different and the use of tonality is also different. However, they are established as different languages as they are spoken largely in different political area – Thai in Thailand and Lao in Laos, and both have official status in their respective states – which plays a crucial role in establishing them as separate languages. The case of Hindi and Urdu are somewhat similar. These two have different scripts and have established official statuses in India and Pakistan respectively. However, these languages are not only extremely mutually intelligible, but history show that linguistically these two languages are better classified and two registers of the same language. The varieties currently known and clearly differentiated as Hindi and Urdu were recognized as the same language and were variously called Hindvi, Hindi, Dihlavi, Gujri, Dakani and Rekhtah, for a long period of time (Rahman, 2011). The name Urdu is not attested before 1780, when it was being developed as a lingua franca between Hindus and Muslims. The process of its construction involved absorption of Persian and Arabic words, morphemes, phonemes to the contemporary Hinvi/Hindi grammatical structure. Even after the use of Urdu for a substantial period of time, the clear separation of Urdu from the language from Hindi did not happen. The two languages representing two separate identities emerge gradually as later, partly prompted by the British understanding of the languages; Hindi with Sanskrit words came to be represented as a language for the Hindus and Urdu with Persian words for the Muslims *ibid* (2011, p. 36).

As seen in the above example, it is not possible to determine purely linguistic criteria on which varieties are united under one language. So it comes down to non-linguistic criteria to construct languages by creating separating lines. It is often seen throughout history that, political and social events play a determining role in uniting language varieties and their speakers as members of the same language

community by assigning them a common linguistic identity. It is often argued that the consolidation of Bengali language community is motivated to a large extent by the 1905 decision by the then British government to split Bengal into two provinces. This gave rise to the historically unifying movement against partition of Bengal, which sought to unify the Bengali speaking population irrespective of their caste, creed or religion. Chaklader argues (1990) “the British inadvertently politicised Bengali language in 1905 when they split it into two state provinces.”

Instance of politicisation of language is also seen in the policy adopted in grouping of diverse language varieties enveloped under Hindi in India. It is also argued time and again by scholars and linguists cf. (Friedrich, 1962; Dasgupta, 1970) that varieties officially considered as Hindi are linguistically too dissimilar to be considered as the same language. They come from almost all the branches of Indo-Aryan (cf Ghosh, 2012). One is reminded of the comment by Suniti Kumar Chatterji in this context in *Languages and Literatures in modern India* (Chatterji, 1963:111).

If in Europe we could conceive Portuguese, Spanish and Catalan ceasing to produce literature... and speakers of all these accepting French as their main literary language, studying only French at school and reading and writing only French, and if on that basis we were to lump together the earlier (and even modern) literatures in all these languages and dialects as ‘French’ literature, then we would be in an analogous situation for ‘Hindi’.

So, it can be seen that the traditional categories of dialect, sociolect and language itself can be effective tools of separation, even though they are often not done on the basis of purely linguistic criteria, but the imagined division between the those categories. However, language based groupings can be constructed on various other criteria, which may constructed on some locally relevant norms not be immediately visible nor equally applicable universally.

LOCAL AND NEGOTIABLE CATEGORIES OF OTHERING

Categories may be constructed around more locally relevant criteria as opposed to the universally recognized criteria of geographical space or social and ethnic class. These categories are unique and diverse and are often dynamic in nature. These categories can be based on various understandings of local versus non-local, or a two local groups based on their attitude to life in general or it can be observed as a process in construction as a conversational strategy.

As an example one can look at Ekcert’s study in Detroit schools (1989). Among the young students in that area, class is determined by the orientation to their school institution on the one hand and to the urban area on the other. These categories are called *Jocks* and *Burnouts* and can only be understood in the context

of their local cultures and attitudes. The Jocks constitute a middle class culture, one could say a corporate culture and they base their networks, identities and social lives in the school, and particularly in the extracurricular sphere. They avoid Detroit except for institutional contacts such as museums and professional athletic events, and they plan to leave the local area for college, and establish new networks upon graduating from high school. The Burnouts, on the other hand, represent a working class culture. They reject the institution as a basis for social life and identity, basing their networks, identities and social lives in the neighbourhood and the broader city. They are almost all pursuing a vocational curriculum and aim to find work in the factories and businesses of the local and urban area upon graduation. Eckert shows that these two groups demonstrate perceptible phonological variations in their speech. The burnouts make use of newer urban changes in the pronunciation of some vowels more often than the jocks. The study further reveals that the "...patterns of variation are not set in childhood, but serve as resources in the construction of adolescent social identity." This study shows that varieties may be along the locally relevant lines and not just along universal categories.

Dyers and Wankah's study (2012) conducted at the Green Market Square in Cape Town shows how the local vs. non-local distinction is accentuated in the linguistic behaviour of the inhabitants. In this extremely multicultural area categories are constructed along the lines of south Africans and non- south Africans, especially the migrants by the repetitive use of 'us' and 'them' and by exaggerating linguistic and other habits of non- south Africans.

Similar process of selfing and othering was demonstrated in a study by Cornips & Rooij (2013) conducted in Rotterdam, the Netherlands among the language minority youths. Since the 90s there is a dichotomous division in the area based on the criteria of those whose parents are both born within Netherlands (autochthons) and those who are born outside or those who have one parent born outside the Netherlands (allochthons). This division is so well established that "the binary opposition between autochthon (= white) Dutch versus allochthon (= Muslim = Moroccan) has become so all pervasive in Dutch society that persons and groups who do not fit the categories (white) Dutch, Muslim and Moroccan have become all but invisible in media and in public debate, this is the case of Surinamese Dutch, most of whom are non-white Dutch nationals and thus destabilize the autochthon/ white versus the allochthon / non-white binarism". (ibid, p 130). The paper analyses responses of sixteen young inhabitants of Rotterdam of Dutch nationality. The processes of selfing and othering involved intricate and composite use of many categories and one of the most important criteria that these youths adopt for self identification during the interview is the *straattaal*. *Straattaal* which literally means 'street language' is basically Dutch with Surinamese words and is

associated with the language of urban youths. It was seen that the 'self' among the respondents included those who would be addressed and spoken to in *Straattal* and the 'other' as those with whom they would not communicate in that language. Through the use of this language variety these youth try to establish that their identity that is related to the place or the locality in which they live. What was interesting in this study is that these youth who identify themselves as Surinamese have little knowledge of their heritage language Sranan. In stead the new street language takes the place of a new identity marker. Here is an excerpt from the interview in the paper (ibid, p 149 ff).

FW: with whom would you talk like that?

Vincent: Surinamese, Antilleans, doesn't matter except for Dutchmen.

FW: Moroccans as well?

Vincent: yes, Morkos are masters in it

....

Romano: for example, a Dutchman I know who has been living with a Surinamese woman for a long time and who can talk Sranan. He also plays Surinamese music, when you hear him talk, is just able to do so. Some do it in order to act tough and they aren't able to speak at all, he doesn't act exaggerated, he just acts ordinary. He dresses like a Dutchman but he talks Surinamese

Vincent: him we just accept

Romano: if you know several languages, I appreciated you for that but you have to stay normal, be yourself.

Here through reported usage of utilisation of language varieties, one can see the construction of a binary categorisation of autochthons and allochthons. The self is associated with speaking and being a *Staattaal* and other is constructed around those who are not able to use it. The example that Romano offers is of a white Dutchman who plays Surinamese music and can speak Sranan, the heritage Surinamese language (a language which Romano does not use very often and of which he has poor competence) by the admittance of Romano himself. Yet he is othered on the basis of a language variety which is iconicised as a symbol of the community constructed. Place of origin becomes the criteria on which the lines are drawn and street language becomes the icon of the group.

The process of selfing and othering can often be a matter of negotiation and renegotiation. Rampton (1995; 2005) in his studies involving a group of multiracial urban adolescents shows how 'crossing' or alteration between languages or codes can be a tool for a speaker to claim a membership of a group in which they are not

accepted traditionally. Crossing is different from switching in that speaker has legitimate right over the languages or codes incorporated in the progress, whereas in case of crossing the second language does not legitimately belong to the speaker. Therefore, in case of crossing, there is a sense of movement across the border, a negotiation of the boundaries that separate 'self' from the 'other'. Rampton argues that while membership of a group can be constructed around inherited cultural or ethnic lines, during a speech even or in course of conversation, through code crossing that group membership can be neutralised or reconstructed as a new group member in the situated performance.

Jaworski and Coupland (2005) show that gossiping is an effective conversational tool to achieve group solidarity and it does so by excluding the protagonists of the gossips or the "gossipees" and putting them in a liminal and borderline position. The construction of the in-group identity, the 'self' is again created in opposition with the 'other' who is subjected some shared discussion involving some 'newsworthy', usually pejorative elements or some other non-positive descriptions or evaluations. In their work Jworsky and Coupland observes that the process of othering works through the discursive representation of an individual or a group as foreign, deviant or anomalous. They also note that these discursive strategies do not really create clear boundaries of the 'self' and the 'other'. Instead, the construction of the in-group and out-group memberships are created by "playing with and negotiating around the unclear fuzzy edges of social categories, norms and acceptability." (p. 687)

Palfreyman (2005) shows that in a English language teaching programme in Turkey the construction of a shared us-them categorisation by the teachers, students and administrators are common practice and he argues that a deeper understanding of this process of othering can help to build more effective pedagogy and study materials.

CONCLUSION

In the discussion above, it is seen that language is often used very effectively as a tool for exclusion and it does so in diverse ways. The most noticeably the separation of the 'self' and the 'other' starts with the categories of language and language varieties. This may be illustrated with examples of attitudes towards standard versus non-standard varieties of language, the local versus non-local categories that can contribute in identity formations or in the different subjective and political criteria that are used to create lines to separate languages. However, language can exclude and separate in many more subtle and complex ways other than these obvious categories. It can create locally relevant categories; create self versus the other dichotomy in the use of language style and language behaviour and through various discursive strategies.

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