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Language and Identity

This paper discusses the symbolic function of language. Language plays an important role in the identification of groups. We use it to present ourselves as a member of one or more groups. At the same time, we recognize others as members of particular groups based upon their linguistic usage.

Though the main function of language is that of communication, it is not always used with only that function in mind. In a discussion of the nature of human language, Edwards (1985) notes that the world has many language communities; their linguistic systems are not mutually intelligible, but they can be sorted out into families based upon similarity. One would think that it would be advantageous for human communication if the number of languages in the world were somehow made smaller. Yet thousands of languages still exist. Why is this the case? Some say that is due to “the human desire to stake particular linguistic claims to the world, to create unique perspectives on reality and to protect group distinctiveness” (1985, p. 16). In other words, it is natural for a group of people, or at least its members, to strive to preserve the existence of the group. And if the group does not differ to an adequate degree from the other groups in its vicinity, then its unique identity is put into question. Language plays an important role in the identification of groups. Groups of various sizes — ranging from a clique of high school students, to the inhabitants of a city, to a whole nation — all use language to exhibit the fact that they differ from other groups. At the same time, we all use the language that we hear to recognize members of other groups.

Edwards maintains that language can also be used as a means of secrecy, in order to preserve a group’s unique grasp of the world. Within a group, language serves as a means of communication. Between groups, however, language can have the opposite effect: a person who cannot understand the lan-

guage of a group will be shut out of that group's belief system. The group will preserve its "unique perspectives on reality" if non-members cannot understand its language. Thus Edwards argues that language can function as a means of both communication and concealment.

Black English Vernacular (BEV), for example, is a dialect spoken by many African Americans in the United States. It has been shown that besides its structural difference from standard English, BEV facilitates semantic change as a means of concealment from mainstream (white) members of American society. For African-Americans this tradition stems from the days of slavery, when the lyrics of songs were often ambiguous in meaning:

Spirituals, Black English versions of White Christian religious sentiment, began not only as acts of religious devotion, but also as coded messages amongst an oppressed people.

I ain't never been to heaben but Ah been told,
Comin' fuh to carry me home, Dat de streets in heaben am paved wif
gold,
Comin' to carry me home.

Steal away to Jesus was an invitation to a gathering of slaves; *Judgement Day* was the day of the slave uprising; *Home, Canaan* (the promised land) and *Heaven* were all veiled allusions to Africa. A spiritual that talked of a fellow slave "a-gwine to Glory" was actually making a reference to one who had successfully boarded a repatriation ship bound for Africa. (McCrum, Crann, & MacNeil 1986, p. 219).

But BEV has continued to be used for concealment. Its creative semantic shifting is still a recognizable feature:

Even today, in the right context *ugly*, meaning African-looking, can mean 'beautiful'; *bad* (pronounced baa-ad) can mean 'very good'; *mean* can denote 'excellent.' (p. 219)

The slang of secret societies in Hong Kong can serve as another example of how a variety (or, in this case, a register) can be used for the purpose of concealment. These secret societies, known as "triads," have a centuries-long tradition in China, originating as organizations whose goal was to overthrow the Manchu dynasty (Bolton & Hutton 1995, p. 160). Because of the secrecy involved with their activities, triad members developed a system of communication that the normal Cantonese-speaking population could not understand. Until the late nineteenth century, the triad societies abided by a highly codified system of rules, and membership was endowed upon an individual only after an elaborate initiation ceremony. By the beginning of British rule in Hong Kong, however, these organizations began to develop into decentralized groups that delved in various criminal activities. Because of this transformation, which has continued to the present, the term "triad language" can today be

understood as referring to the street slang of teenage gang members, as well as to the language of ritual and esoteric knowledge (drawn from poems, legends, secret signs, cryptic writing, etc.) (ibid.)

Throughout the history of British Hong Kong, the authorities have consistently outlawed membership in the triad societies, since it was widely believed that these groups posed a threat to colonial rule. In addition, the performance of triad rituals and the use of triad language have been punishable acts. This type of legislation has also extended to the media. Censorship in Hong Kong to this day is particularly strict, and triad language has been generally banned from most programs. The censorship of triad language has not only been for the purpose of preventing coded meanings from being transmitted, but because of what the code represents. The authorities have always felt that the triads were a major threat to British rule in Hong Kong, and for this reason they outlawed everything that represents the societies, including their language.

The fact that triad language was censored due to what it represents is not trivial, for an individual's linguistic usage serves as an important marker of group affiliation. This is what Edwards calls the symbolic function of language, which he distinguishes from its communicative function.

A linguistic variety, then, serves as a symbol of the group that uses it. In fact, Edwards maintains that a language can even lose its primary communicative function and remain only symbolic in nature.

... it seems clear enough that there has been, and continues to be, a strong resistance to the abandoning of a particular language, even for the practical attractions of a lingua franca ..., and a desire at most for an instrumental bilingualism in which the original variety is retained This suggests that there can be a distinction, within a language, between what I have called communicative and symbolic functions. (Edwards 1985, p. 17)

This is the case with the Irish language in Ireland. Irish is spoken by very few people, yet it remains a strong symbol of Irishness. Practically speaking, Irish has a symbolic function but no really communicative function:

Only about three per cent of the overall population now use the language in any regular way, there is little interest in Irish restoration, and many are pessimistic about the maintenance of the little Irish still used. Yet, there does remain a value for Irish in the symbolic sense, and it can be argued that Irish continues to occupy some place in the constitution of current Irish identity. (ibid., p. 18)

Although the Irish case may be atypical, it helps to illustrate the difference between the two separate functions of language.

Although Edwards stresses the connection between language and nation, he also tells us that any variety can have a symbolic function. Theoretically, this

is possible at any level of abstraction. Namely, every individual is a member of more than one group — nationality, ethnic group, age group, social class, sex, profession, etc. — all at the same time. And depending on the immediate social situation, an individual will fluctuate in terms of which group he wishes to represent, his language use changing in accordance.

In the Republic of Croatia there is a high awareness of regional differences, and this has an apparent affect on language usage. In spite of the country's small physical size, Croatia has several distinct regions which display a surprising variety of geographical and climatic features. Through history the people of these regions have not continuously been in direct contact with each other. This was due to both geographic and political factors. Transportation and communication between the inland regions of Croatia and its coastal regions have always been hindered due to the Velebit and Dinara mountain ranges. Also, political boundaries have hindered communication between one and another region of the country. Different parts of today's territory of the Republic of Croatia have lived under different foreign powers. The Hungarian and Austrian crowns ruled over Croatia's northern regions for centuries. Zagreb, being a central city in and capital of the Hungarian administered area of Croatia, was essentially ruled by Pest for nine centuries. The Venetian Doges ruled over the cities of Dalmatia until the Napoleonic invasion at the end of the eighteenth century, which also brought about the fall of the city of Dubrovnik and its environs after its centuries-long existence as the independent city-state of Ragusa. Under Austrian rule, the frontiers of Croatia that bordered the Ottoman empire were formed into the *Vojna krajina* (Military Frontier), which was governed directly by Vienna, and was separated from the rest of the Croatian lands. Even after the abolition of the Military Frontier, Croatia's territories in Austria-Hungary were administratively divided between the two halves of the kingdom. Only in this century, after the founding of Yugoslavia, were all of these lands incorporated into one state. Indeed it was not until the end of the Second World War that Istria and the city of Zadar were ceded by Italy to Yugoslavia, and became officially part of Croatia.

These political and geographic factors have formed the impetus behind a general regional mentality within the Republic of Croatia. Croatians are quite conscious of their regional background, even when they move to a new region. Migration in Croatia is generally a country-to-city trend. The wealthy and educated sectors of society live primarily in the urban centers, and for people from provincial areas the gaining of wealth and status are considered to go hand in hand with moving to the city.

In Zagreb this fact is especially salient. This is a city to which people from all regions of the country move for a variety of reasons. It is the country's capital; it is the largest industrial and business center; it is the seat of the country's largest university; it is the main center of culture in Croatia. Newcomers to the city, however, are not always completely integrated. Most families whose oldest members are from other regions keep close ties with their relatives who live elsewhere. These ties are especially important in times of economic hardship. A family whose relatives live in the nearby countryside

may, for example, depend upon them for farm-raised food products. In return, their country cousins may depend upon them for housing their child when attending high school or college in the city. Thus ties with one's relatives in other regions are important not only for emotional reasons, but for reasons of economic survival as well.

Here I have attempted to explain that people in Croatia are, due to geographic, political, and economic reasons, aware of their regional membership. This sense of belonging to a particular regional group can be symbolized in language. As an example, we may discuss this idea in terms of a hypothetical individual. Namely, let us imagine an educated university professor, born in a port on the Dalmatian coast where a variety of Čakavian is spoken, but who has been educated since the first year of high school entirely in Zagreb and who has continued to live there for the next three decades of his life — until the present. It could be the case that he still speaks his maternal vernacular, affecting not only his pronunciation, but also morphology, syntax, and lexicon, when at his work place at the university. Why might this be so? It may be that many of his students are from Dalmatia. It may be that throughout his life his social network consisted of other people from his native region who also moved to Zagreb. It may be that he spends every summer at the family homestead in his native port. Some or all of the above factors may be true, but regardless of this, it is definitely true that whenever our professor uses his Čakavian vernacular in a Zagreb milieu, he not only communicates in his native tongue, but he also uses it as a symbol. The way he talks shows that he is, or considers himself to be, Dalmatian.

However, it is also possible this professor, who was born in Dalmatia but has lived in Zagreb since the age of fourteen, speaks a variety of Zagreb Kajkavian (ZK) when at his work place at the university. He may still have many Dalmatian friends and students and spend his summers with his relatives at the seaside. Whatever the case is, in addition to his Zagreb vernacular being a tool for communication, it is also symbolic of his membership in the Zagreb linguistic community.

A third possibility would be that he uses some form of standard Croatian when at the university. As with the other two possibilities, this variety is not only a means of making other people understand him, but it is also a symbol. It may be a symbol of his being educated, of his lack of regional loyalties, and, depending on certain lexical and grammatical features of his speech, it may even be a symbol of his being a patriotic Croatian citizen.

The urban vernacular in Zagreb serves as an important symbol of group membership. For old-stock Zagrepčani, ZK is reminiscent of the strong cultural tradition in the city, and of their local roots. For newcomers on the other hand, ZK is often used to mark their membership in the urban community. According to Šojat (1979 A & B), ZK is a prestige variety in everyday urban life. Adults who move to the city often pick up characteristics of ZK. This tendency varies, of course, from individual to individual, and Šojat has observed that educated Štokavian speakers are the least likely to change their speaking habits. Thus, in addition to its communicative function, ZK symbolizes the ur-

ban community as a unique group. Its characteristics are used — by natives and newcomers alike — to present the speaker is an “insider”, a member of the community (Šojat 1979A, p. 119).

Language is one of the most versatile tools that we have at our dispense in order to show who we are and to which groups we belong. It seems that this fact is closely related to the variation of language over geographical and social space. In other words, it is conceivable that linguistic varieties exist and differ from one another due (at least in part) to their symbolic function.

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Jezik i identitet

Rad se bavi simboličkom funkcijom jezika. Jezik, naime, ima istaknutu ulogu u identifikaciji nečije pripadnosti određenoj grupi. Služeći se jezikom, pojedinac iskazuje svoju pripadnost jednoj ili više različitih grupa, ali istovremeno, također na osnovi njihove upotrebe jezika, prepoznaje druge kao pripadnike vlastite, ili nekih drugih grupa.