The Implications of Modernity for Language Retention and Related Identity Issues: Applying the Thought of Charles Taylor

by

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Preamble

I’d like to acknowledge the Kalaallit of Greenland, on whose traditional land this conference is taking place, where we are sharing information and opening dialogue on issues of importance to the Arctic in the hopes that, individually and together, we can effect a more sustainable world, find academic achievement and knowledge, and maybe even find wisdom—knowledge of the heart—which fosters peace and friendship.

This paper is a part of what will be a larger paper for a course with Dr. Bruce Morito, a philosophy professor at Athabasca University (AU), in Alberta, Canada, where I am a student in the Master of Arts – Integrated Studies program. I’m here in part by the grace of an AU Research Dissemination Award.

Introduction

Since colonial times, and now in the era of globalization, choosing between a local, traditional language and a rising global language is a phenomenon common to many parts of the world. Certainly, it is a choice many Indigenous peoples have faced in Canada on a continual basis at least for several hundred years. Intergenerational gaps in local language transmission are increasing. Extinction is predicted for thousands of the world’s languages: of Canada’s roughly 61 Indigenous languages, almost all are not expected to be heard into the next century. There is a lot of work these days in Canada on Indigenous language retention to stave off these dire consequences and to facilitate the healing of the social and psychological ills that seem to come in tandem with loss of language, but more and more Indigenous people lean towards using a global language.

The role of language in the formation of identity has received a lot of attention in recent decades, but how does identity affect language retention? Charles Taylor, a communitarian, scholar, and critic of modernity, and arguably Canada's premier philosopher, has offered much on the topic of identity creation in modernity and on the concept of the self and its implications for freedom in modern society. He defines modernization as

> a set of changes in institutions and practices—the development of a dynamic, market-oriented industrial economy, a bureaucratically organized state, organized military forces, and (in some versions) modes of stable popular rule. The first three changes, if not the fourth, are in a sense irresistible. Whoever fails to adopt them, or some functional equivalent, will fall so far behind in the power stakes as to be conquered and forced to undergo these changes anyway. (Taylor, 2001, pp. 148–149)

He says, given this definition of modernization, the "relations of forces" (Taylor, 2001, p. 149) are good reasons for modernizing. On the effects of modernizing traditional cultures, Taylor says modernization

> is like a wave, flowing over and engulfing one "traditional" culture after another. This wave moves either from one region to another, via colonization or preemptive imitation, or from one subgroup to another. . . . (Taylor, 2001, p. 149)

How does this force act on us? What is the lure of the modern identity? and How does it affect language retention in Indigenous cultures? In an interdisciplinary paper with

a philosophical approach, and using Taylor's conceptual scheme, this paper seeks to develop a descriptive analysis of the answers to these questions.

Modernity Affects Identity

Modernity developed in reaction to a previous order, ruled by the church and monarchy in a hierarchical world view. In reaction to this order, the value of the individual was lifted up as a rational being, and freedom in modernity defined the individual as the focal point, wherein the rational agreement, or contract, with the individual would be the only legitimate grounds for society.

In modernity, according to Taylor,

> things centre more and more on the subject. . . . Things that were once settled by some external reality—traditional law, say, or nature—are now referred to our choice. Issues where we were meant to accept the dictates of authority we now have to think out for ourselves. Modern freedom and autonomy centres us on ourselves, and the ideal of authenticity requires that we discover and articulate our own identity. (Taylor, 1991, p. 81)

Modernity, then, affects identity. We see ourselves as guided by personal goals and values; we live essentially to self-actualize that which we see as the purpose of our lives. Freedom is related to the belief that we make ourselves; we construct our own identity. We are free agents. We can still defer to an authority outside ourselves, to a higher order of moral understanding, but not without our own sanction. Allegiance, Taylor says, is to oneself alone. Unless ties to others can be rationalized as being consistent to one's goals or outlook, individuals are unencumbered by any ties, thereby

gaining a new mobility. We do not assume a shared identity with anyone else: the prevailing attitude is "to each, his or her own." Modern society is considered an aggregate of individuals, each pursuing a unique vision for his or her personal life.

The freedom to act according to personal directives is generally considered a benefit gained for the individual in the modern era. Taylor allows that there are shared, common principles integrated into the modern identity, namely, rationality, efficiency, and instrumental thought, which, together, form the new standards of right action. The status of the individual as an equal citizen, confirmed by a rights-based modern culture, is another perceived benefit in this age of dignity for all, which has evolved from the Ptolemaic concept of the universe and the pre-modern concept of a pre-ordained chain of being, where equality was anathema to the age and only a chosen few enjoyed a status of honour.

In modernity, everything focuses on the subjective and how it plays out in the socio-political sphere. Modernity treats as an absolute truth that the individual can resist a defined order and neutralize the effects of one's birth, culture, and location. The epistemologies of modernity are embodied in the belief that through individual reason and knowledge, a Utopia can be formed in which science and technology would usher in social progress.

Modernity fosters an industrialized society. Themselves embodying the modern identity, corporations are unencumbered by loyalty ties to any body outside themselves, with exceptions for relationships of convenience, those that make sense under the same principles of rationality, efficacy, and instrumental thought. They are tough-minded, mean, and competitive economic entities, but they are not self-reliant. In order to live out

their raison d'être and make a profit, they need a dedicated labour force that will join the ranks of producers—and consumers—filling important requirements of the market economy: without our adoption of these societal roles, the system would collapse. We re-negotiate our identities to accommodate these roles as we buy into the deal: for the sake of attaining wealth, thereby improving our lots in life, for ourselves and possibly for our nuclear families, we become part of the economic machine, often taking advantage of our mobility and moving to locations where we are told the jobs are. Urbanization and the growing needs of rural communities encourage big government and bureaucracy.

Identity Affects Linguistic Attitudes and Behaviours

To Taylor's description of modernity there is another common characteristic to add. Communities that had been relatively isolated, and that had previously known only local and neighboring traditional languages and their dialects, become integrated into a more-encompassing, imperializing society. In the process, dominant, ruling languages—the languages of modern commerce—spread into these communities. People are faced with the choice, both for themselves and for their children, between a local, traditional language—like Inuktitut—and a dominant, rising global language—like English. More and more people faced with such a choice lean towards using the dominant, intruding language, even when they appreciate that their local language is significant to their contemporary, cultural, collective identity—that is, to the way they "perceive and define their own place in the world" (Dorais, 1995, p. 294).

That was one of the findings of Louis-Jacques Dorais (1995) in his studies on language attitudes and behaviours in the early 90s in Canada's Eastern Arctic, in Igloolik,

Nunavut, and Quaqtaq, Nunavik. People self-identified as Inuit, and were considered to be Inuit, even if they did not speak an Inuit language. If they did speak Inuktitut, they considered it to be the "easiest way to express their feelings and inner thoughts, and . . . a symbol of who they really are" (p. 295), "a weighty element of self-definition" (p. 296), and an important part of preserving their deepest Aboriginal identities (pp. 297 and 299); and yet, they preferred English as a language of practicality for ease of communicating with the outside world (pp. 296, 297), for making money (p. 299), and by young people for chatting amongst themselves (p. 296). Dorais said that the dichotomy between Inuktitut as the language of identity, and English as the language of practicality "reflect[s] underlying assumptions about the interface between traditional culture and contemporary life" (p. 299).

But what do linguistic behaviours say about identity? Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) suggest that linguistic behaviour might best be understood as "a series of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles" (p. 14). If this is true, then perhaps two things might be said of individuals who choose to use a dominating modern language over their local traditional language: first, that they identify with the modern identity at least insofar as they perceive it is in their benefit to use the modern language over their native language; and, second, that they are trying to fit, in some way, into the culture in which that modern language is dominant.

Modernity's Demands on Language

The culture of modernity is imperialistic. Modernity seeks new frontiers in which to conduct business, and it promises attractive gains to people who are willing to engage.

As Rauna Kuokkanen (2007), from the Deatnu Valley in Samiland, has said,

> [A]ll societies and communities are being affected by the forces of globalization, which seek to eliminate borders of all kinds. The pervasive nature of the neoliberal, corporate mentality is also reflected in the fact that many of its values have not only been adopted but also, by and large, naturalized—values such as competition, hyperindividualism, profit, and the externalization of social responsibility. (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 157)

Languages evolve from culture and practice, and vice versa. Languages that have a privileged place in the modern identity have evolved to embody these values and to promote a secular world view that is primarily concerned with the life of production and exchange, the rigid control of it, and litigious impulses to prove rights and claim for damages.

Indigenous societies trade, too. They traded well before Contact—they probably traded well before the Greeks—but rather than evolving to profile commerce, Indigenous languages evolved to profile the concept of "the gift." Kuokkanen says the concept of the gift comes from a world view "characterized by reciprocity, a sense of collective responsibility, and reverence toward the gifts of the land" (p. 23). To the modern identity, however, collective responsibility and reverence are abstractions, diametrically opposed to its concerns. The modern identity doesn't thrive on these things; in fact, they get in the way of the real business of modernity, which is contributing to the life of the economy. Modernity rejects these qualities represented in traditional Indigenous languages.

Identity Affects Language Retention

What, then, are the implications of modernity's demands on language for language retention?

The force of modernity on collective identity is powerful. The more one buys into the modern identity, the more one adopts its languages and values of commerce, the less one identifies collectively.

In addition, modernity separates traditional speakers from their languages. Socio-linguist Mark Fettes (n.d.) says that this happens when a dominant language appropriates words and concepts from the local language to use them to its own purposes. These words and concepts take on new meaning for the local speakers. At the same time, the dominant language infiltrates its discourses of the market into the local language, thus displacing the community-developed stories that until then had helped the people make sense of their world. The result is that traditional speakers, as Fettes said, "cease to have a sense of ownership and control" (Fettes, n.d., para. 8) of their language, and their language slowly loses its traditional voice and its ability to empower its speakers.

The transition from a local traditional Indigenous language in which one feels at home, to a dominating language and culture that embraces modernity involves a re-definition of *the self*. Under what can seem an irresistible force on traditional speakers and cultures to identify as moderns and to deny their traditional identities, the languages of commerce are adopted and languages that express a different world view become secondary or are abandoned. Whatever values and ways of supporting identity are

contained in traditional Indigenous languages become subordinate to those of languages of commerce.

Taylor's Critique of Modernity

Taylor's critique of modernity illustrates a paradox. The goal had been to champion the individual, but the opposite situation has been created. To free the individual from the church and monarchical systems, modernity developed the idea of the rational agreement or contract with the individual as the only legitimate grounds for society; but this creates an individual without a history, and political context becomes derivative and of secondary importance.

The modern demands of freedom, choice, and largely autonomous development of identity ultimately leaves the individual alone and disconnected. We are disempowered and alienated, and society is fragmented. Industrialized society moves in to engage and own our labour. We soon define ourselves by what we can produce and consume. We say we are self-makers, but we are nothing unless we produce something others want to buy: therein lies the paradox of modernity. Taylor illustrates that modernity is self-defeating and built on the false assumption that society is an aggregate of individuals. He says the individual is a product of society, not the other way around. We are nothing if not social beings. We are social beings first; individuality arises from that reality.

So the paradox of modernity results out of unanticipated but logically connected consequences of falsely conceptualizing the nature of individuality.

This is—and isn't—an "Indigenous problem." If this paper's argument is sound, its value may be in that it identifies a real danger modernity presents for traditional

Indigenous communities and their languages. However, the ills that befall individuals who lose their identity are not suffered by the individuals alone. In a compelling paper called *What do you lose when you lose your language?*, Joshua Fishman (1996) suggests that a country also feels the effects on its citizens and is complicit in causing them.

This paper opens dialogue, then—not only in scholarly arenas, but in policy ones as well—to consider the deeper underlying causes and conditions related to social and psychological dysfunction that we might need to address if we were to protect diversity and democratic principles of inclusion.

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