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Language and Society: Language Can Either Separate or Bring People Together

Language was originally created as a way for people to communicate with each other, essentially bringing them together. As time has progressed, this has phenomena has shifted and language is now used just as much to separate people, as it once did to bring them together. Today the use of language is still primarily to communicate and is used as a source of commonality within a community. However, some people, as well as certain communities, use the information that language reveals as a way to distinguish themselves and other use it as a way separate and judge people. This is due to the fact that when someone opens their mouth and speaks, they are exposing all of their personal information which can reveal where they are from, what social class they belong in, and how intelligent they are. Some people do not see this as vulnerability and instead are proud of their language and use it as a way to distinguish themselves and their community. Since language is the source of communication, some people struggle to interact with others as they cannot read, or speak a certain language, which limits the information they can be exposed to and communication with others that humans need.

The language that people speak can serve as a way to demonstrate where they are from. Each country has its own official language and sometimes that language will have different dialects. These dialects reveal where the person speaking it is from, and they use this dialect to distinguish from different places who speak the same language. In James Baldwin’s “If Black English isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What is?” he discusses the different dialects of the French language and explains that “A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique is saying.”(Baldwin 350). They are all speaking French but with a dialect true to their own territory. Gloria Anzaldua explains in the chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” from her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* that this actuality is true for the Spanish language as well. Chicano is a language that is used by Mexicans living in America today and Anzaldúa explains that “Chicanos, after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization, have developed significant difference in the Spanish we speak”. She goes on to reveal that even Chicanos from different areas have different dialects (Anzaldúa 343). There are “several regional dialects” and a Chicano from Texas may have difficulty in understanding a Chicano from Arizona or New Mexico (Anzaldúa 343). Nonetheless, each region and community uses their dialect of language as a source of commonality and unite them.

People will use language to identify themselves; they achieve this by taking advantage of the fact that it can be a source of commonality, as well as its ability to separate the human race. Baldwin explains that language “is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (Baldwin 350). This statement can be applied to the south of France which takes pride in its rich culture that was highly influenced by Spain, Italy, and Northern Africa. The south divides itself into regions which are struggling to preserve their original identity, their culture, and their language, which is being overrun by French society. The area influenced by Spain, called Cataluña distinguishes itself and speaks its own language called Catalan. The more central region called Occitania has its own language called l’Occitan, and Provence “still clings to its ancient and musical Provencal, which resists being described as a ‘dialect’” (Baldwin 350). Similarly, Anzaldúa discusses how language is crucial to identity and how “Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify [them]selves as a distinct people” (Anzaldúa 342). She goes on to illustrates that they spoke Spanish as a native tongue, but were not Spanish, and that they were living in America, but did not identify with Standard English, and were caught in between both languages. They were different and could not connect or identify with either language. Therefore they had no other choice but to create “A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves” (Anzaldúa 342). Even though they cannot connect to either community, they were able to come together through the language they created and come together as the Chicano community.

Speaking a certain language can reveal what social class someone is from, incidentally setting them apart from the others classes. In Arabic countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, French is spoken by the wealthy class of people. When they speak French in their country whose native language is not French, they are instantly distinguished as being from the upper class. In Samoa, the chiefs and their families will speak a complicated version of Samoan called Matai Language. People who speak this language have high titles, are highly respected, and will often receive gifts from other families and villages. Growing up in and belonging to certain social classes will cause someone to develop their class’ language. Gloria Anzaldúa explains that she has experienced this when she says that “From school, the media, and job situations, I’ve picked up standard and working-class English” (Anzaldúa 342). If someone speaks in England, others will be able to categorize and identify what social class they are from. As Baldwin puts it “To open your mouth in England is … to ‘put your business in the street.’ You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future” (Baldwin 351). Humans use language as a way to place others into a certain category. They use language to distinguish people from different parts of society, similarly to how clothing is used to determine in which part of the community someone belongs too. All of this is revealed simply from the way someone speaks and the language they use.

Language can also be used to separate people of different intelligence. When applying for a job, people will often be brought in for an interview. The purpose of this interview is to discuss with the person and to get a sense of how intelligent they are and how well they are suited for the job. Simply by the way someone speaks, their choice of words, and how well they can present themselves with words, the person conducting the interview will have to make a decision and chose to hire the person or not. Applying for college is another example of how language will separate people of different intelligences. How one writes their essays or fills out their applications will be the basis of whether or not they will be accepted into college. Very few colleges have entrance interviews and most of the time they do not see the individual who is applying, and have to rely solely on the use of their language to make a choice.

Not being able to read a language or not being able speak the right language can limit someone from information or hinder them unable to communicate. When an individual is illiterate, they are sheltered from a variety of information that is available on the internet, through books, and taught in school. When someone cannot read, they are limited from many intellectual ideas or thoughts that are only shared through books and novels. Moreover, not speaking the right language can be just as much of a handicap, and as Baldwin explains “If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world’s history, had been able to speak to each other, the institutions of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did.” (Balwin 351). Language is a necessity for the communication of humans, and without language it becomes an arduous and almost impossible task to work together, solve problems, and learn new information.

The benefits of language far outweigh the disadvantages, but it is still important not to neglect the many issues that persist. Language is crucial to the human race due to its vast amount of capabilities, and the fact that it is the basis of communication. One of these capabilities is being able to separate people, but not always in a negative manner. The south of France distinguishes itself from the rest of the country through its languages and as a way to preserve its culture. Separation can cause people to find an identity and in the case of the Chicanos, bring together a group of people that previously did not identify with any of the groups around them. Language also reveals what social class someone is from, which is something private and is something that people sometimes do not want to share, yet they cannot control it. It can be a tool for distinguishing the intellectuals and people right for a job, but due to many controversies, this is not the ideal way to make an accurate judgment of someone. Illiteracy is also a disadvantage and can cause people to not be able to progress through life and be able to experience everything the world has to offer. Finally, not being able to speak the same language makes it nearly impossible to communicate, which was one of the main reasons that slavery lasted as long as it did. Language is not perfect, but it vastly important and crucial for the survival and progression of humanity.

Works Cited

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