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Language Addition instead of Language Replacement

Globalization is one of the most common phenomena in modern society, which enables people once lived in one certain discourse community to move to another discourse community. In order to integrate into the new discourse community, what people do first is to learn the language in this community in order to communicate with the majority. However, these groups of people may tend to replace the language they spoke in the original community by the one in the new community. This trend may be positive because such a language replacement can join different people into the same language discourse community, which eliminates the necessity of probably informational-losing language translation and brings convenience for people’s communication. However, it may also be negative because language is more or less a part of culture or foundation of a certain group of people. Although language replacement has some advantages, the disadvantages it has can cut off the connection of those who undergo the language replacement to their original discourse community. Fortunately, there is one solution for those who move from one discourse community to another to integrate into the new community and meanwhile keep the connection to their original community – language addition; in other words, to learn the new language in the new discourse community without abandoning the original language. This paper will analyze language replacement and language addition by examining Boroditsky’s *Lost In Translation*, St. James’ *I has A Dream*, Jim Borgman’s cartoon *A New Ghetto*, and Sarah Lyall’s *At Home With Amy Tan: In the Country of the Spirits.*

Language replacement happens to an individual, a family, and even a race when they move from one discourse community to another, both obviously and obscurely. For individuals who have already learned the language spoken in their original community, language replacement at first behaves just like language addition because they acquire a new language without losing their original one. But if they later stop using their original language, the new language will become their exclusive language and they will begin thinking only in the way of the new language. After losing their way of thinking in their original language, they will finally become novices of their original language again. For a family, the new members in the new community who hasn’t learned any language will be influenced by the large language environment surrounding them and become only able to speak the language of the new discourse community, even though the smaller language environment, their family, is an environment involving their original language. After a few generations of these new family members replace the older members who can speak their original language in the family, the family undergoes a thorough language replacement. A race that is surrounded by another discourse community undergoes a similar progress of language replacement.

Language replacement can be beneficial for people who move to a new discourse community because it offers them a chance to express their thoughts to majority in this new community. Majority are literally majority, which means they are in quantity the people who have the greatest power in the community. Losing chance to express thoughts to the majority means not only losing connection to the majority but also the chance to gain power or voice from the majority because of self-isolation. Many African-Americans speak a language called Ebonics, which is similar to Standard English but cannot be understood by those who speak Standard English. St. James has published an advertisement to ban Ebonics (“*Acts of Inquiry*” 703). In this advertisement, James shows us a sentence written in Ebonics “I Has A Dream” on the back of Dr. Martin Luther King, and below is a text telling us speaking Ebonics is isolating and losing voice again. Dr. Martin Luther King is a famous African-American activist who led the African-American Civil Rights Movement and finally gained civil rights for the African-American. The sentence “I has a dream” is grammatically correct in Ebonics but not in Standard English. St. James successfully uses this sentence to let people who just use Standard English feel how confusing Ebonics is. As it is on Dr. Martin Luther King’s back, it conveys us a feeling that the confusing Ebonics destroys the rights gained by Dr. Martin Luther King. Then the text below further explains the incomprehensible Ebonics prevents African-Americans’ voice from being heard and understood. Also discussing about this topic, Jim Borgman’s cartoon *A New Ghetto* (*“Acts of Inquiry”* 394) shows us the word “Ebonics”, and the letter O in the middle is a round wall constructed by bricks. There are some people wearing shabby clothes inside the wall saying “JUS’ WHAT WE NEEDED-A NEW GHETTO.” The round wall surrounding the people symbolizes the language barrier that the Ebonics speakers face. With the poor people inside wall, James demonstrates that speaking Ebonics, a language that is incomprehensible by the majority in the society, is refusing to the connection to the outer society. Combining this with the demonstration from the advertisement “*I has A Dream*”, we can conclude that these African-Americans face poverty because they isolate themselves from the majority, which makes their voice of the desire to gain power or live better lives unhearable by the majority. These two examples indicate the only way for the minority to express themselves to and gain the power of voice from the majority is to speak what the majority speaks. For those who undergo the language replacement, it is never a problem to be considered because they can natively speak what the majority speaks.

However, language replacement can also be harmful to those who move out from a certain discourse community because language is a part of culture or even the media of culture. If those who move to a new community replace their own language with the majority one spoken in that community, they will lose not only their own language but also all the cultures based on their own languages. For example, Cantonese people have a special tea-drinking culture called Yum-Cha, which is deeply influenced by and deeply influencing the Cantonese language. When Cantonese people have tea-drinking party, they perform a finger gesture to appreciate others’ pouring tea for them called “kowsow (tapping two fingers on the table).” The word “kowsow” sounds like “kowtow” (an ultimate ceremony in East Asian cultures that appreciate someone by knocking head on the ground) in Cantonese, so Cantonese people chose to perform kowsow to appreciate their friends with their grateful hearts. If Cantonese people replace their language by others like English, the existence of kowsow gesture will no longer be reasonable, because the origin of kowsow, the symbolism of kowsow, and the sincere appreciation of kowsow carried by the linguistic relationship between kowsow and kowtow no longer exist. Then, the kowsow gesture will disappear and the special appreciation for those who pour tea will be forgotten. Language replacement does replace the language in a certain discourse community, but the girders based on the language and supporting the culture are left unconnected, which will finally lead to the collapse of the culture based on the replaced language.

Furthermore, language influences the way we think. If people replace their language with another one, they may have problems understanding what and how their ancestors think, which is bad for inheriting cultures, knowledge and thoughts. In the article *Lost in Translation*, the author Boroditsky tells us “in Pormpuraaw, a remote Aboriginal community in Australia, the indigenous languages don't use terms like ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Instead, everything is talked about in terms of absolute cardinal directions (north, south, east, west), which means you say things like, ‘There's an ant on your southwest leg.’” These people use absolute directions to refer to everything, so they have to think in an absolute direction way and have a good sense of direction. People in general who don’t speak their language can’t understand why they use absolute directions and how they keep track of their direction because those in general are not Pormpuraaw people. If these people replace their language with a majority language, they may lose their own thoughts about directions and they will have a normal sense of directions as most people have. In addition, they will also be confused by the fact that their ancestors have sense of directions much better than they have. Moreover, if a group of Pormpuraaw people undergoes the language replacement while another group doesn’t, which is a common situation in contemporary world, things may become even worse. These Pormpuraaw people who have the same consanguinity but don’t speak the same language will be unable to not only understand the language each other speaks but also understand the way of thinking each other have. Those who don’t have a way of thinking of Pormpuraaw language cannot talk about any direction with those who speak this language even if they have some methods to translate their language into Pormpuraaw language because they don’t natively think about directions in absolute way and vice versa. In this perspective, language replacement is negative because it separates the way of thinking of those who move to another community from their origin, historically and positionally speaking.

However, in the other hand, language replacement can be positive because it integrates the ways of thinking of those who live in the same discourse community but have different origins. Also in the article *Lost in Translation*, Boroditsky tells us languages also shape how we understand causality. “For example, English likes to describe events in terms of agents doing things. English speakers tend to say things like ‘John broke the vase’ even for accidents. Speakers of Spanish or Japanese would be more likely to say ‘the vase was broken.’ Such differences between languages have profound consequences for how their speakers understand events, construct notions of causality and agency, what they remember as eyewitnesses and how much they blame and punish others.” These two ways of thinking are totally different, and this difference are also macroscopically reflected. For example, because Japanese tend not to blame other as much as what English speakers do, Japanese custody may tend to use more logical reasoning than eyewitnesses while English speaking countries tend not to do so. And probably in English speaking countries, the personality of the criminal may be a factor that can influence the result of the sentence. If an English speaker visits Japan and witnesses the process of committing the crime, He/she may not be accepted as an eyewitness because the custody doesn’t very believe eyewitness even though he/she swear he/she clearly knows the details. Because neither the custody nor that visitor understands why they think in this way, the communication broke up. On the contrary, if they speak the same language, they will think in the same way and understand what and why the other thinks in that way, and then the communication will be successful.

Language replacement is positive for its help to integrate new relocated people into the majority and negative for its cutting off connection of these relocated people to their origin. Language replacement integrates new relocated people’s way of thinking into the majority and separates their way of thinking from their origin while refusing the new language has the opposite effect. All of these conclusions point to a solution between replacing original language and refusing new language – learning the new language and maintaining the original one, i.e., language addition. Language addition allows people to express their thoughts to both their original discourse community and the new community they move to, understand the cultures in both their original and new community, and think in two linguistic ways. All these advantages come from mastering both their original language and the language spoken in their current discourse community.

The core of language addition is to balance the languages a person speaks, which is also its difficulty that creates the opportunity for the language replacement to take place. For individuals who move to a new discourse community, they should not only focus on the majority language in the new community but also keep using their original language. Once they have learned something new in their second language, they should try to find out its equivalent translation in their first language in order to balance two languages and practice thinking in their first language and also make sure they are still able to talk with those who speak their first language about the new things they have learned. For a family, it is fine to allow children born in the new community to get involved in the surrounding language environment, but in order to connect them to their origin, they should still later learn their mother tongue even as a second language. Amy Tan, a famous Chinese-American writer who wrote *The Joy Luck Club*, speaks perfect English compared to her mother who speaks “broken” English, but she didn’t learn Chinese seriously until her adulthood. Because of her racial background, Tan is also regarded as an inspiring person in China. The Tiananmen Square uprising was crushed in 1989, and Amy Tan was asked to speak in Chinese to provide inspiration to the students who underwent this event. But Tan says all she could think of was “Turn off the light. Don't make trouble. Go to sleep” (“*At Home With Amy Tan: In the Country of the Spirits*”). Maybe her words have obscure connotation for the students or maybe not, but what we can see is her being not able to speak Chinese is an obstacle of her to connect to her original discourse community – China. Tan understands the significance of this connection, so she has made an effort to study Chinese as an adult. In addition, the society should encourage language addition and help immigrants’ children not only adapt to the society itself but also reconnect themselves to their original society. I am very pleased that nowadays I can see such a tendency. For example, Confucius language academies can now be easily found in USA, where not only Chinese students but also students with different racial backgrounds can learn Chinese language, Chinese cultures, and many other things related to China. This is a very good source for Chinese immigrants’ children to learn their original language and reconnect themselves to their origin, and for other non-Chinese children to join themselves into another brand-new discourse community.

The contemporary society is the society of globalization, which enables people to live out of their original community. In this process, people tend to integrate into the new community and separate from their original community by replacing their language. In order to stop separating from the origin, what people should do is to turn a language replacement into language addition by balancing their original language and the language spoken in the surrounding environment. This procedure is not easy, but once people do that, they will benefit a lot from their being able to connect to two different discourse communities.

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