

## LANGUAGE BARRIER – IMMIGRANTS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

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To introduce this presentation, I borrow a classic case from renowned pioneer of multi-culturalism in Australia, Al Grassby (1984). In his book, *The Tyranny of Prejudice*, Grassby describes a misadventure that typifies immigrant experience in a foreign country: A Yugoslav man is arrested because of a misunderstanding that has arisen from language difficulties. The man becomes increasingly frightened when he is being taken to the police station. The ensuing interrogation at the station intensifies the misunderstanding and the man's fearful reaction. Grassby thus describes the scene: *"By this time the man felt under threat and made a dash for the door. This brought the full force of restraint upon him and he reacted with further panic. It was then decided to call the police surgeon who saw the man struggling and talking quite incoherently – at least as far as the doctor was concerned because he did not understand him. He decided to have him committed and he was duly delivered to the state mental hospital... Within the next few days it was speedily recognized that the man was perfectly sane"*.

The end of this story would have been tragic if the man had been assessed as schizophrenic. Unfortunately this tragedy is not uncommon amongst immigrants. In a study of 50 Yugoslav-born immigrants who had received a diagnosis of schizophrenia, the schizophrenic diagnosis was confirmed in only 26% of the patients when they were assessed in their native language (Zalokar, 1989). It has been increasingly recognized that schizophrenia is over-diagnosed in immigrants and other marginalized groups (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1982). Marcos *et al.* (1981) also present convincing data to support that language barrier seriously thwarts the assessment of psychopathology. Recently discovered dangers to immigrant patients'

health from misdiagnosis due to language barrier is a primary concern in the field of ethnic psychiatry today.

In addition, there are significant secondary problems resulting from language barrier which do not merely result from linguistic misunderstandings, but are rather related to subtler levels of language aptitude. Many migrants may eventually succeed in mastering the grammatical aspects and basic vocabulary of a new language, but ultimately fail to achieve the proper accent, melody, or intonation. Speech which is grammatically correct but lacks appropriate intensity is often misunderstood, particularly when dealing in the realm of emotions. Immigrants' spoken emotion may sound either exaggerated or indifferent. Since their emotional expression becomes a disortion of their inner reality, they exude a false impression; hence the listener may mistake them for haughty, aggressive, pushy, isolative, rude, etc. Thus, the language barrier at the subtle level of verbal intonation and accent becomes an emotional barrier as well.

The Soviet neuropsychologist Luria has shown that language is more than a means of verbal communication; it is both the formative element of the organization of the central nervous system and the result of higher cerebral activity (Luria, 1932). Therefore, a disturbance in the language sphere automatically disrupts central cerebral activity. The French poet and philosopher Emanuel arrived at a similar conclusion, though through a different form of expression. He wrote: "*Whosoever does injury to language also wounds a man*" (Lewis, 1980).

Luria (1932) also suggested that the acquisition of speech and transition to a new culture changes the structure of the psychophysiological processes: "*...a sudden transfer to another language is combined with a very destructive process.*" A regression to more infantile systems of reactivity and primitive cognitive processes may follow. "*The result of an emotional disturbance,*" writes Luria, "*consequent on the language conflict is to weaken the inhibitory and restraining functions of the higher strata of the nervous apparatus. The higher regulating mechanisms suffer, resulting in distortion and disorganization of behavior.*"

The respected scientist, anthropologist and social psychologist, Margaret Mead (1966) also wrote about the deleterious effect that cultural and language change could have on personality structure: "*The perception of the outer world becomes*

*atomized... Relationships disappear and experience is broken down into small discrete bits... The outer world appears atomized into meaningless units; the inner world also loses its structure and becomes fragmented and chaotic... Ethnical attitudes tend to be expressed in very black and white terms."*

In light of Mead's perceptions, one can speculate that some detrimental consequences of language cross-over, specifically those affecting interpersonal relationships, may be related to intrinsic differences in the structure of modern languages versus the more ancient languages. Generally the formation of modern languages has paralleled a need for more practical, simpler and more universal terms. Ancient languages, on the other hand, tend to have more complex grammatical structures and discrete signifiers which allow subtle, varying degrees of communicating or implying emotional relationships between people and/or objects. For instance, Australian Aboriginal nouns have four genders which can be inflected in 19 cases; meanwhile, nouns of newer languages keep one or two forms. Perhaps the most recent developments in modern languages reflect the trauma of the technological age; our senses and sensibilities have been assaulted by the by-products of material progress, mass media, mass production, mass violence. Modern man has become numbed or hardened; the richness of relationships and emotions has been somehow retracted from his life and his language. Conway (1971), borrowed from Lawrence the term, "the withheld self", to describe this situation in Australia. According to Lawrence (1966) in his novel *Kangaroo* (1923), Australians have "got no inside to them. They're hollow. The Colonies make for outwardness. The inside soul just withers and goes into the outside... There is no desire for communication."

Various studies of bilingualism in children and adolescents corroborate the conclusions of Luria, Mead and others, and also indicate that it is not any easier for children to settle in a new country. Lewis (1980) writes in his observation of immigrant school children: "Where bilingualism is a result of forced acculturation, bilingual children may be handicapped. There is an adverse effect on integration of dominant value orientations and behavior. Delinquency, the propensity to drop out of school, and fragmented personality are all laid out at the door of bilingualism." Along the same lines, Erikson (1968) describes cases of underdeveloped ego-identity in adolescents resulting from forced assimilation. In this situation, he observes that mistrust prevails, total rage develops, there is a confusion of values, crisis of intimacy and a tendency towards exclusive totalism. To discuss this kind of reaction among

adolescent groups, Brody (1968) coined the term, "cultural exclusion", which broadly applies to behaviors such as group withdrawal, cultural hibernation and behavioral disorganization. He also associates with this phenomenon higher incidence of illness, arrests, poverty, illegitimacy, suicide, higher narcotic rates, and reduced utilization of educational and health institutions.

Meanwhile, at the preschool level children who are compelled to rapidly forget their first language also lose many significant memories associated with their early developmental years. The loss of primary language at this age often triggers off regressive processes that endanger normal psychological maturation, leading to emotional blunting and intellectual disassociation.

Similar regressive tendencies have been observed among adult immigrants. When new language starts to dissolve the previous one, the simplest mental activities can be affected. The Nobel Prize Winner for literature, Singer (1981), recounts in his autobiography, *Lost in America*, an episode soon after his arrival to the United States, when he became completely disoriented in a hotel: "*I began searching for the elevator, but it had vanished... From somewhere, a black maid appeared. I asked her where the elevator was and she shouted something I could not understand. I began searching for the stairs, but at that moment a door opened and someone stepped out of the elevator... How was this possible? Could nerves render someone blind?*"

Immigration may be accompanied by periods of intense emotional stress when the flow of thoughts can become so incoherent that the resulting behaviour resembles organic psychoses. However, when observed in the context of immigration, intellectual disassociation usually has no organic basis or relation to schizophrenic pathology. An understanding that the tension and anxiety associated with immigration is sufficient in itself to bring about a regression is critical to psychiatric assessment. Effects can be even more accentuated for those immigrants who are chronically ill or elderly.

The multiple handicaps of language barrier are such that the new immigrant can be compared to a disabled person, though he or she is seldom recognized in these terms. Meanwhile, society's selected or 'token' disabled groups meet with positive discrimination – a special seat on buses, trains and trams, for example. The

immigrant, on the other hand, is the victim of negative discrimination; he is left to himself and his shortcomings, considered stupid, or even despised. This blind prejudice may be tied to the experience of conversing with an immigrant, which in itself can invoke hostility. A simple attempt at conversation, listening to a foreigner's arduous speech, can breed frustration, disharmony and aggression in the listener and, as a result, in the speaker.

## THE INFLUENCE OF DOMINANT MONOLINGUALISM

Up to this point, the negative aspects of a bilingualism known as folk-bilingualism have been discussed. It is a bilingualism in which an immigrant's native language is subordinated to the dominant one, which the majority of the host society values as more worthy. Bilingualism in this regard is the prey of monolingualism – a phenomenon which has an intensifying effect on language barrier.

It seems that many English-speaking groups today live within a monolingual culture. What would be the basis for this relationship? Some have conjectured that it is because most English-speaking cultures have formed out of a series of assimilations. For example, the older history of England is a series of repeated invasions. Time after time, the conquerors and the conquered assumed the relationship of masters and slaves, the masters imposing their native language on the slaves. Out of this traumatic cycle of the invading/invaded, the basis of the English language and a monolingual (and ethnocentric) society simultaneously formed. The English language itself reflects this painful history in its implicit, odious connotations ingrained in that which is alien. For example, synonyms for 'alien' offered by the Collins Thesaurus (McLeod, 1986) include: adverse, conflicting, contrary, estranged, exotic, foreign, inappropriate, incompatible, incongruous, opposed, outlandish, remote, repugnant... 'Foreign' to English-speaking cultures signals danger or hurting and is managed psychologically by society through classic defense mechanisms: indifference, attack, or forced assimilation. In addition, the educational system in England reflects a subconscious cultural desire to erase the trauma of England's older history. Levi (1983) writes: "*We were taught nothing at school about the pre-Roman British, and little about the pre-Norman English.*"

Australia is another revealing example of an English speaking country with a painful history shaping a monolingual culture. Western (1983) surmised in a study of Australian students' ethnic stereotyping that, "*The ethnic stereotypes that were in existence thirty or so years ago are still well and healthy today. An acceptance of multiculturalism is still a long way off.*" Al Grassby's (1984a) appraisal is similar: "*Despite the abandonment of the White Australia policy and the policy of assimilation, we still have the old hangovers with us.*"

Studies which ascribe prejudices to uneducated people (Birrell and Birrell, 1981) become suspect when one realizes that monolingual culture is generally promulgated by intellectuals. For example, most English authors cite only English-written works. Baldauf and Jernudd (1986) found in their study of language use in psychological literature that a major part of non-English language literature was grossly ignored by native English speaking psychologists. In addition, in English-written articles, 96% of the citations are from English. In psychiatry, the situation is not different. Indeed, only a scant selection of foreign scientific books can be found in most monolingual countries' science libraries.

Toole (1977) describes, in the introduction to the English addition of *Neurology* written by German-Swiss author Mumenthaler, the effects that monolingual culture has had on English education: "*Neurologists, medical students, and house officers in the United States have had very little contact with the Continental School of Clinical Neurology. The rich contributions of the German, Swiss, Italian and French schools are lost to most of us because of our poor knowledge of foreign languages. Our traditional American and British orientation have resulted in a bias...*" This ignorance is even greater in the field of psychiatry. Excellent psychiatric literature by German and French authors is generally neglected; authors such as De Clerambault, Lhermitte, Baruk, Ey, Kretschmer, Von Gebattel, and many others are often not known by name. Ungar (1960) in the introduction to his translation of *Frederick Schiller* laments that: "*...our cultural life has been poorer because one of the world's greatest writers has remained almost unknown to the wider public in English-speaking countries. The language barrier is a formidable one for my part.*"

Rack (1988) observes that xenophobic tendencies are even stronger when the immigrant's physical appearance differs markedly from the dominant population:

*"British ethnocentrism is felt at its worst by immigrants where difference is marked by their skin colour."*

Wilton and Bosworth (1984) observe a similar repugnance of foreign languages in Australia: *"Despite multiculturalism Australians seem even more reluctant in the past to learn any languages other than English. Australia of the 80s is not so different than that of 1945"*. Essentially the arrival of so many immigrants in Australia since World War II has not altered sentiments associated with monolingualism.

Likewise, in Australia monocultural attitudes have led to extreme consequences when superimposed on the native Australian population. In her autobiography, Glenyse Ward (1987), an Aboriginal Australian, remembers that as a girl she happened to be invited to her master's party. She introduced herself to a lady, who responded, *"Oh, dear, I didn't know you had a name."* The Aboriginal situation is not exceptional, and may be one of the worst cases of social marginalization resulting from the dominance of monoculturalism.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both language barrier and the pressure of assimilation contribute in varying degrees to regressive emotional and pathological development. A monolingual culture instills xenophobic trends which stifle the positive potential of a multicultural society. Mainstreaming – merely a euphemism for forced acculturation – has increasingly become the final aim for multiculturalism in monolingual countries.

We may underline two unwanted consequences of language barrier, monolingualism and forced over-identification with the majority: 1.) individual stress leading to regressive and psychiatric sequels; and 2.) the likely imprint of regressive psychological changes on the national character. Both minority and majority within a monolingual culture are negatively affected.

In short, the discouragement and resulting dissolution of native language has been shown to play a primary role in the genesis of psychological and sociological

pathologies. To amend these detrimental trends, ethnic minorities, cultures and language must be met with positive discrimination. To inspire a peaceful, culturally symbiotic existence, immigrants must be allowed to adapt without being forced to give up their previous identity, and encouraged to institutionalize valuable traditions within the structure of a multicultural society.

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POVZETEK

**JEZIKOVNA PREGRADA – IMIGRANTI IN  
KULTURNI PREOBRAT**

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*Jezirovne pregrade so še bolj travmatske kot druge okoliščine kulturnega preobrata, ki ga povzroči bodisi imigracija v tuje okolje ali pa nasilna sprememba in zavojevanje neke kulture.*

*Psihiatrična izkušnja samo ponazarja, do kako hudih nesporazumov in posledic lahko pride zaradi jezirovne pregrade. Študija tega pojava pa je obenem*

pokazala, da jezik nikakor ni samo sredstvo komunikacije, ampak je obenem oblikovalec in izraz človekove duševnosti in osebnosti. Materin jezik dobesedno temelji v možganskem ustroju. Zato je prehod v drugo jezikovno področje lahko travmatski tudi v primeru, če se imigrant sorazmerno dobro priuči drugega jezika.

Vsak jezik predstavlja obenem nezamenljiv izraz neke posebne kulture, tradicije, gledanja in presojanja življenja in pojavov. Zaradi tega vodi vpeljevanje monolingvizma nekega svetovnega jezika v hudo kulturno osiromašenje in nevarno zožitev ljudske kulture. To pa ni vprašanje, ki prizadene samo priseljence, ampak se tiče v največji meri tudi manjših narodov, narodnih manjšin in prstoživečih ljudstev, ki utrpijo usodno dezintegracijo ob trčenju z drugačnim jezikom in kulturo osvajalcev ali ekonomskih odločujočih sil.

Povzetek naj morda še najbolje zajame in zaključi misel, sposojena od velikega pesnika Pabla Nerude: "Mislim, da mora človek živeti v svoji domovini, in prepričan sem, da pomeni izkoreninjenje človeških bitij okrnjenost, oropanost, ki tako ali drugače ohromi jasnost njegove duše. Lahko živim samo v svoji deželi; ne morem živeti, če se je ne dotikam z nogami, rokami in z vidom, če ne čutim, kako krožijo njene vode in njene sence, če ne čutim, kako moje korenine iščejo v zemlji materinske prvine."