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Some Remarks on Ethnic Identity, Language and Education

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1. Introduction

Although in many cases language and ethnic identity are strongly intertwined, there is no necessary or categorical relationship between them. People can, in other words, perceive themselves as members of one and the same ethnic group without sharing a common language, or, on the other hand, use the same language across ethnic boundaries. The more common case, however, is that language is one of the major features of ethnic or ethnolinguistic group membership and that ethnic identity is most powerfully expressed through the ethnic group language (see Appel & Muysken 1987 and Edwards 1985 for an overview). The reciprocal relationship between language and ethnic identity plays an important role in situations in which an ethnic group's identity and language are challenged by another group. One of the most evident cases in which this happens is the context of migration that generally forces ethnic groups to become ethnic minority groups as compared to the dominant majority in an immigrant or host country. The ethnic group's language automatically becomes an ethnic minority language that is susceptible to processes of language shift and language loss. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to the minority group's

Innovation, Vienna (1990), pp. 421 - 435

ethnic identity. Important questions to be answered in this respect pertain to the direction of the relationship between language and ethnic identity maintenance and to possible factors that play a role in both ethnic minority language and ethnic identity maintenance. One important factor is the extent to which the immigrant country's authorities provide the ethnic minority group, through explicitly formulated policy regulations in, for example, the field of education, with the facilities to maintain its language and identity.

In the following discussion of these issues, I will use three different sources. Firstly, I will refer to a sociolinguistic research project on language shift and language loss in ethnic minority groups; secondly, I will briefly go into some aspects of Dutch educational policy with respect to ethnic minority languages; and finally, I will pay attention to an evaluation case study on the practice of community language teaching in England. These sources have in common that they all, from various angles, deal with the possible consequences of the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual character of contemporary western society, and as such can contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between ethnic identity, language and education.

2. Language Change Processes and Ethnic Identity

One of the main aims of the project 'Language shift and language loss in Turkish and Italian immigrants in the Netherlands and Flanders', which was carried out from 1987 to 1989, was to investigate which non-linguistic factors have an effect on the (rate of the) linguistic processes of language shift and language loss. Language shift in this project refers to a change in the functionality of languages or language varieties, whereas language loss refers to a change in the linguistic competence of speakers of a language or language variety. Language shift and language loss are considered to be interrelated phenomena: loss of first language competence, occurring in members of immigrant groups, can be seen as a result of the shift that these groups experienced from a monolingual to a bilingual, diglossic situation (Ferguson 1959). To the extent in which this situation of bilingualism can be typified as 'subtractive bilingualism' (Lambert 1974), language shift is likely to eventually lead to language loss. At the same time, the loss of part of the

proficiency in a given language may also cause a reduction in the functionality of that language, so that language loss in this respect may lead to further language shift.

In dealing with possible factors influencing language loss and language shift, it has often been observed that any given factor is ambivalent with respect to its influence on language shift and loss processes: in some cases the factor seems to promote language shift and loss, whereas in other situations the same factor turns out to retard these processes (Jaspaert & Kroon 1989). An example may illustrate this point. The factor interethnic marriage is one of the factors clearly influencing language shift and loss processes. The direction of this influence, however, can vary considerably. For an Italian immigrant in the Netherlands marrying a Dutch woman, there appear to be at least three possibilities. (1) He might 'lose' his Italian as a consequence of the growing number of contacts with Dutch relatives, neighbours, etc. (2) He might 'keep' his Italian, since having a Dutch wife 'as an interpreter and mediator' saves him from the necessity to learn Dutch. (3) He might be forced by his Dutch wife to retain and even strengthen his ethnic Italian identity since his wife tries to get involved in the local Italian community by taking Italian courses, taking her husband to Italian folk dance, visiting the Italian Centre, etc. These three possibilities can have a different impact, of course, for different ethnic groups. The only way in which these different possibilities can be understood is by not focusing on the direct influence of social factors, such as interethnic marriage, on language shift and loss, but by examining the way in which these factors exert their influence through intervening variables or concepts (Appel & Muysken 1985). To construct these concepts, a more general theory of sociocultural contact and sociocultural change is needed (Fishman 1972).

Starting from Pierre Bourdieu's (1982) theory of the Economy of Symbolic Exchanges, with the Linguistic Market as a central concept, we tried in our research to test the hypothesis that language shift and language loss are especially influenced by (1) the way in which the dominant group deals with the ethnic minority group and its language by, for example, creating official facilities for ethnic minority language use on the dominant linguistic market, i.e., in situations in which interaction between the dominant group and the ethnic minority group takes place; (2) the cohesion of the ethnic minority group and the importance of the ethnic minority language on the ethnic linguistic market, i.e., in situations in which

interaction between members of the ethnic minority group takes place; (3) the ethnic minority group members' anticipation of the acceptability of using the dominant group's language on the dominant linguistic market, i.e., in the final analysis, the ethnic minority group members' proficiency in the dominant language.

Without going in any more detail here, I can say that we succeeded relatively well in clarifying the influence of social variables through these intermediary concepts with language shift and, to an admittedly lesser extent, language loss (Jaspert & Kroon 1989 and 1991a). Regarding the relationship between language and ethnic identity, the main finding was that the role of language in ethnic identity maintenance is especially obvious in connection to factors that have to do with group cohesion. As long as an ethnic group perceives itself as an ethnic group and exists and functions as an ethnic group in the immigration situation, the ethnic group language is maintained as an expression of group membership. To the extent, however, in which ethnic group cohesion dissolves, the ethnic group language tends to pass into disuse. An important factor in the dissolution of ethnic cohesion is the (indirect) pressure exerted by the dominant society. There are conflicting interests between full participation of ethnic minority groups in the dominant society and their maintenance of ethnic identity and ethnic group language. Members of ethnic minority groups who want to profit from the dominant society's economic opportunities, as Byram (1991) puts it, need a certain level of proficiency in the dominant language, whereas, on the other hand, in developing and maintaining a social identity the ethnic minority language is an important tool. Combining participation in the dominant society and the maintenance of ethnic identity is only possible in an pluralistically organized society in which members of ethnic minority groups are offered room for social mobility without assimilation. In most immigrant countries, however, the situation is different (Banks & Lynch 1986). In order to succeed in mainstream society, ethnic minority group members have to assume an assimilationist, or at least integrationist-assimilationist attitude which inevitably causes them to leave the ethnic group and, eventually, leads to the dissolution of the ethnic group. This process is clearly reflected by the attitude members of ethnic minority groups have with respect to their own and the dominant language. The general tendency seems to be that as soon as members of ethnic minority groups reach a certain level of proficiency in the dominant language they start using it, also in intraethnic communication. Then the ethnic group

language, notwithstanding the positive attitude that is generally still expressed towards it (Jaspaert & Kroon 1988), passes into disuse and the shift to the dominant language takes place. Losing ethnic group cohesion, ceasing to exist as an ethnic group, and, as a consequence, shifting to the dominant language seems to be the price immigrant ethnic minority groups have to pay for social mobility in the dominant society.

3 Educational policy and ethnic identity

If the above argument holds true, it becomes doubtful whether formal education in ethnic minority languages in an immigration situation could make a difference in ethnic identity development and maintenance. In the Netherlands, as in many other European countries (Eldering & Klopogge 1989), a number of educational policy measures have been taken with respect to the position of ethnic minority languages, or 'own language and culture', to use the official term, in mainstream education. The possibility to attend 'own language and culture' lessons in Dutch mainstream education at primary level has formally existed since 1974-75. Notwithstanding the fact that the present regulations with respect to these lessons contain a considerable number of participation restrictions, in 1990 almost 61,000 pupils (67 per cent of the target group) attended these classes as compared to 46,000 in 1985 (65 per cent of the target group). At secondary level Turkish and Arabic can be chosen as optional subjects since 1987. This option was taken by 5,821 pupils in 1989 as compared to 3,732 in 1987.

In October 1990, the Dutch State Secretary of Education published a new policy document on 'Own language teaching as part of an integrated language policy' (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen 1990). The main line of thought in this document is that ethnic minorities in order to achieve maximum participation in Dutch society first of all need to acquire sufficient proficiency in the Dutch language. In addition, ethnic minority children who speak a language different from Dutch at home should be offered this language as a subject in school. Learning their own language at school by ethnic minority children, still according to the policy document, serves a number of different goals. Following Extra (1990), these can mainly be characterized as more or less transitional in nature: ethnic minority language teaching is supposed to facilitate the acquisition of proficiency in

Dutch, to diminish the gap between school and home environment, and to improve performance in other school subjects by using the children's own language as a support language of instruction. Other goals that are mentioned are directed towards the reinforcement of cultural identity, the development of a positive self-image and self-awareness, and providing access to the children's own culture and cultural heritage.

The Dutch policy with respect to ethnic minority languages in education has generated a great deal of criticism (Kloosterman 1990, Kroon & Vallen 1990, Extra 1991, and Jaspaert & Kroon 1991b). An aspect of this criticism that deserves special attention in the context of the relationship between ethnic identity, language and education is the question which language is chosen for ethnic minority language teaching. In principle the ethnic minority language that is taught in 'own language and culture' lessons is the national standard language of the ethnic minority's country of origin. Other languages are only allowed as support languages, whether or not it is in a bilingual approach, in the initial stage of education. The teaching of those national languages in 'own language and culture' lessons follows a first language teaching methodology: the language that has to be acquired is, at the same time, the language of instruction.

Opting for national languages of the countries of origin in ethnic minority language teaching has (at least) two possible negative consequences. The first one is that for many ethnic minority groups the national language of their country of origin is definitely not their mother tongue. Just two examples from a longer list are Moroccan immigrants whose mother tongue is one of the Berber languages but who are supposed to follow Standard Arabic lessons in Dutch schools since Standard Arabic is the national language of Morocco, and immigrants from Turkey who, although their first language is Kurdish, are supposed to attend Turkish classes, both under the heading of 'own language and culture' teaching. For Kurdish and Berber speaking immigrants Turkish and Standard Arabic are in many cases foreign languages. The learning of foreign languages is undoubtedly important for children from ethnic minority groups as well as for children from the dominant majority, but there should be no misunderstanding: expectations regarding the possible benefits of this type of ethnic minority language teaching for ethnic identity development or reinforcement in ethnic minority children can only be very low.

Secondly, it should be noted that even when the language taught is the original mother tongue of the minority group involved, it need not necessarily be the mother tongue, i.e., the language of primary socialisation, of each individual child. In many ethnic minority groups the ethnic group language has developed into a 'community language', a language that is not necessarily acquired as a first language by all the ethnic group's members and in which not necessarily all group members are fully proficient, but that is nevertheless looked upon as the group's ethnic language, i.e., the language, as a core value (Smolicz 1981), belonging to the group's ethnic identity. In this case also, the effect of teaching a community language in a first language approach on ethnic identity development or maintenance is doubtful. A community language methodology that combines characteristics of both a mother tongue and a foreign language teaching approach as is being developed in England could provide a possible alternative for this problem.

A final, more fundamental problem has to do with the degree to which ethnic minorities find it acceptable that a dominant group's institution, such as the educational system, is involved in provisions for teaching the ethnic group's language as a means for ethnic identity maintenance. Among ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands (and elsewhere), there are advocates of the position that governmental interference or influence in matters of ethnic identity maintenance, for example through mainstream ethnic minority language and culture lessons, negatively affect the group's identity in the end. Ethnic identity and language maintenance in this view has to be an exclusive concern of the ethnic group itself (Dors 1990). The (growing) emphasis in Dutch educational policy on transition rather than on ethnic identity maintenance as a central goal of ethnic minority language teaching, irrespective of the language choice issue, seems to justify this statement.

4. Community Language Teaching and Ethnic Identity

A different approach to ethnic minority languages in education can be found in the EC Pilot Project 'Community Languages in the Secondary Curriculum' which was carried out in the cities of London, Birmingham and Nottingham from 1984 to 1987. One of the main objectives of this project was to integrate community languages into the mainstream curriculum

thereby giving these languages, as subjects in their own right, their teachers and their students a stable and accepted place in the school community (Final Report 1988). In carrying out an evaluation case study of the project, one of my activities was to follow, for one whole ordinary school day, a sixteen year old student of Pakistani origin who was studying Urdu as a community language for his A-Levels in a Birmingham Sixth Form College, mainly looking at what happened to him in terms of language across the curriculum (cf. Kroon 1990).

The school involved is one of the most ethnic colleges in Birmingham (in 1988). At least 65 per cent of the 600 students on roll are English as a Second Language speakers. As far as non-English home languages are concerned, there are speakers of Urdu, Bengali, Panjabi, Gujarati, Vietnamese and Chinese. About 20 per cent of the students have English as a first language and about 10 per cent are of Afro- Caribbean background; they are, however, not considered a separate language group. The multiethnic and multilingual composition of the college has led to the formulation of a clear multicultural policy in which language plays a major role. The aims of this policy that is presented in the college's information material under the heading 'European and Asian Languages - Aims and Objectives' include: "To promote tolerance and understanding of other cultures and civilisations and to enable the student to move away from an ethnocentric view point". In 1987/88 courses were offered in Urdu, Panjabi, Bengali, French, German, Spanish and English. A comparison of the information that is given on European Languages with the way in which Asian Languages are introduced in the college's information material shows that they are dealt with in exactly the same way. One never gets the impression that Asian Languages are inferior to the other languages, or that their inclusion in the curriculum is something very special. The impression which is communicated is that they are languages in their own right, languages that can be studied for examinations, languages which give access to various job opportunities.

Interviews with staff members show that the college's multicultural policy is not just a matter of rhetorics: it is advocated and put into practice by most of the teaching staff and one of the teachers' main objectives is to create a learning environment that takes into account in a positive way the ethnic characteristics of all students. As one of the teachers expressed this in an

interview: 'I would say (...) we have very much an awareness of multiculturalism'.

In the following I will present some fragments of the observation notes which I took during my stay at the college. They are taken from classes in Biology, English, Chemistry and Urdu.

A-level Biology from 9.00 to 10.00 am in room S33. The class consists of eleven students, ten are of Asian background and one is Afro- Caribbean. The lesson is on photosynthesis. After a computer simulation the teacher distributes some information sheets. This gives me the opportunity to ask my case-student, Ghayoor, how his name should be pronounced. 'Don't bother, just call me George' he says when I ask him to repeat the pronunciation a second time. When I refuse to do so, he is surprised: quite a few teachers prefer using anglocized versions of Asian names - even without actually being offered this opportunity.

English is the only language used by the Biology teacher and the students whether in classroom discussions or when working in small groups. Ghayoor's first language is also English. At least that is what he tells me. Apart from English, he also speaks Panjabi and Urdu. Of these Asian languages he prefers Urdu, being the official language of Pakistan, but at home with his parents he usually speaks Panjabi, although they are proficient in Urdu as well. At school he speaks Panjabi with his friends only if they do not want to be understood by their peers. Apart from being proficient in English, Urdu and Panjabi, Ghayoor can also read Arabic. During the many years he attended Arabic lessons he was taught to read the Koran, but, as he frankly admits, he often does not know what exactly he is reading.

The college's information leaflet says that the school, apart from a wide range of courses, modern facilities and equipment, also offers "a multicultural atmosphere". Looking around in the biology classroom, I wonder what this could mean in this particular environment. Apart from a white female teacher and eleven Asian and Afro-Caribbean students, what I see is the familiar setting of a biology class: glass display cases with fossils and shells, posters, stuffed animals, gas and oxygen taps on the desks, and the inevitable human skeleton in a corner of the room. In one of the cases some dusty plastic model parts of the human body lead

apparently quiet and solitary lives. I see a profile of an arm, an open heart, lungs and a pair of male and female reproductive organs, all designed in pink.....

English GCSE from 10.00 to 11.00 am in room N41. The group consists of fourteen students, two of whom are English, three Afro-Caribbean and nine Asian, all sitting in a square. 'Let's get going now, it's five past' the teacher says, and the lesson begins. It is about 'Hobson's Choice' a play written by Harold Brighouse in 1916. The lesson deals with a number of assignments the students have to do on the text. The first question reads as follows: "Discuss the way in which this play highlights the position of women. Does Maggy offer a realistic model of how women could take responsibility for their own lives?". According to the teacher, this is a topic which has been discussed in class quite a bit. The discussion starts immediately. It centers for a while on the position of Maggy in Hobson's Choice and then leads to the Women's Liberation Movement. Finally, the teacher suggests finding out about the Suffragettes in Great Britain and presenting this information in the context of Maggy's role in the play. When one of the students asks where he could find information on the Suffragettes, the teacher tells him to look in a history book, 'or talk to your granny'. 'My grandparents were not in England then', a Pakistani boy quickly replies...

GCSE Chemistry from 11.30 to 1.00 pm in room N35. The lesson consists of a practical in which the students have to do a variety of tests on the reactions of sodium hydroxide. After the lesson I have a short talk with the teacher, who is of Indian origin and speaks Hindi and a little Panjabi. He, however, deliberately never uses these languages in the classroom, not even in classes, like the one which I observed, that consist exclusively of students of Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin. He sticks to English, because, in his view, that is the language the students need, since the majority of them will stay in England permanently. As long as there are a lot of students who have problems expressing themselves in English, it is his opinion that there is no need for diverting their attention from English by using other languages.

A-Level Urdu from 2.00 to 3.30 in room N16 (double period). There are 11 students present. Six of them are girls, two of whom are wearing veils. The students are sitting in rows. The teacher starts by reading the

attendance list and after that explains what they will do. This explanation is given in English. The different subjects to be treated are: reading and text comprehension, translating a text from English into Urdu and the other way around, introducing an essay writing task for homework, and practising oral proficiency in Urdu. While the students are working the teacher tells me that a major problem of community languages in secondary education is that there is no community language teaching in primary schools. During their infancy the children acquire some proficiency in the community language that is spoken in their homes. That is followed by a period of about six years in which there is no community language learning at all, and when they enter secondary education the students' proficiency in English, although far from perfect, is in most cases better than their proficiency in community languages.

The observations which I conducted and of which the above, as I already indicated, are just little fragments, generally speaking, give a positive impression of the degree to which the EC pilot project, in one particular case, succeeded in not only contributing to the development of community language teaching, but also managed to bring issues of language and ethnicity into the scope of other subjects and to put these on the official agenda of the school. As a consequence the school reflects, at least on the level of rhetorics, an explicit awareness of and commitment to language and ethnicity related issues, and the teachers seem to be fully aware of the fact that teaching in a multiethnic and multilingual environment has to have a certain influence on their teaching practice. The incidents mentioned above, however, shed a slightly different light on this generally positive impression. Although the college's rhetoric reflects a multicultural philosophy, in which linguistic and ethnic diversity are considered positive characteristics of not only ethnic minority students but also of society as a whole, the teachers' classroom practice shows a different picture, a picture in which ethnocentrism and lingocentrism or linguicism as Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) recently termed it, have not yet totally disappeared. The pressures of dominant society apparently are too powerful to be escaped, even by committed teachers explicitly working within and adhering to a multicultural philosophy and policy.

5. Conclusion

Which conclusions can be drawn from the above examples and how do they combine? Going back to front, the data presented in Section 4 clearly show that formulating and even practicing an explicit multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual policy in educational contexts, incorporating community language teaching, does not necessarily lead to a type of education that contributes to ethnic identity maintenance. It is certainly not my intention to blame the teachers for not totally succeeding in shaping a one to one correspondence between their teaching practice and the school's and their own rhetorics with respect to teaching in a multiethnic society, but the way in which everyday classroom practice in this particular case does not form the most positive environment for ethnic identity maintenance or reinforcement cannot be overlooked. On the contrary, the stimuli ethnic minority pupils get from their teachers, also without these teachers being aware of it, are more likely to lead to negatively affecting their identity.

The way in which school functions as an institution of the dominant society and as such shapes the functioning of its agents seems to be inescapable. As such, school is bound to leave hardly any room for a minority perspective, even if in a concrete case the official school policy is explicitly directed towards granting this perspective an equal position. The same argument applies in the case of ethnic minority language teaching as it is organised in the Netherlands (Section 3).

'Own language and culture' lessons that deal exclusively with the official national language of the ethnic minority group's country of origin will not easily lead to improving ethnic identity. And, as a matter of fact, these lessons are not meant to have this effect. Even if aims in the sphere of minority language and identity maintenance are dutifully mentioned, an analysis of policy documents makes abundantly clear that in the end transitional aims prevail. Since a certain amount of social cohesion is indispensable for a dominant society to continue existing and functioning, the emphasis on policies directed towards transition and accommodation of minority groups is only natural. The only reason for a dominant group to accept or even foster ethnic minority language use on the dominant linguistic market has to do with the necessity to maintain a vital minimum of communication between the various groups in society. As soon as this vital

minimum runs the risk of breaking down, the majority group can offer facilities for ethnic minority language use, such as provisions for ethnic minority language teaching or translation facilities in the public sphere. The sociolinguistic study reported on in Section 2 reveals that ethnic minorities in a stable immigrant situation tend to follow the rules of the dominant society, i.e., they shift to the dominant language in interethnic as well as intraethnic communication depending on the extent to which their ethnic group cohesion wears away, and as soon as they are able to do so, that is, as soon as they are proficient enough to use the dominant language.

The above is, of course, not to say that ethnic identity and ethnic group language in an immigrant situation in all cases necessarily have to disappear (Fishman 1989). The data referred to, however, in my opinion, build a strong case for not relying too much on the choice members of ethnic minority groups will take if they are confronted with the dilemma of social mobility and ethnic group membership. Likewise, not too much should be expected from mainstream educational provisions for ethnic identity and language maintenance in ethnic minority groups. As long as education as an institution of the dominant society keeps its reproduction function, whether or not it is organised as multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic or even antiracist education, it is not likely to contribute to ethnic minority identity maintenance.

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