

The Social Shaping of Language Use and Biases

The language narratives written by me and my peers Angelyn Mae Tor and Annie explore language in very different ways. As three women from very different language backgrounds, we've had different experiences with language and language learning. Despite these differences, we all experienced social expectations and biases that influenced our use of language. At times these social expectations drove us in a certain direction of language acquisition and practice. Despite coming from different national and linguistic backgrounds, our language use was universally influenced by our peers and families.

Our environments and the people we surround ourselves with shape our use of language. For Annie and myself, accent has been something which has been commented on by our peers since we were young. In Annie's case, she was surrounded by people who spoke a different first language than herself. Annie writes about her friends' words in school "“Oh, Ni Lai Zi Ji Pi Gu~” This is what my friends laughed at me when I was in the middle school. They came from Wubei, ShanXi, Sichuan, all are located within the mainland China, in their eyes, I came from the “bottom of the Chicken” (Annie). Annie grew up Canton, in southern China where Cantonese is the local language. Her classmates spoke China's majority language, Mandarin, as their first language. In her interview she explained her Cantonese accent, and how her friends were able to tease her from being from the South just by listening to her speak, “If you are speak English and you learn Chinese you will have some sort of special funny accent, same way apply

to the Canton people speaking Chinese” (Annie). Her friends could tell from her accent exactly where she was from, and teased her differences in pronunciation in the way all classmates are likely to tease the accent of someone from a different place.

This influence of peers on language Annie which writes about is something which all three of us experienced and dealt with in different ways. While she was teased for her Cantonese accent, Annie strove to make her friends jealous through her mastery of the English language “How can I become the most shining person in my family?” (Annie), which in her mind would lead to success “Learning English will help me “Chu Ren Tou Di”, and it will bring me a nice husband, fortunately” (Annie). In my narrative, I avoid social judgement by modifying my speech depending on my audience, “I was definitely teased in grade school for using one of [the pronunciations], but now I use them interchangeably” (Scardino). When I’m around my family I use the pronunciations which I think will resonate with them more, and I avoid the pronunciations which I think will attract ridicule. Mae Tor’s decisions about language learning and use were also influenced by her peers. In her interview she talks about a bilingual friend at school, “[s]he switches between Tagalog and English naturally, and I just felt like I should do that too” (Mae Tor). While she was motivated by her peers to improve her Tagalog, she was simultaneously discouraged by her parents “[t]hey make it such a big deal if I say a word or a phrase in Tagalog that I revert back to English” (Mae Tor). In these ways all three of us are showing how our language usage was affected by our peers and families.

Before coming to the United States, Annie had concrete beliefs about the English language “English, which is important, it is the only way that you can communicate with the different creature, with blue eyes, white skin, blonde hairs; We called them “foreigners”, they are from Western, super rich countries on the other side of the world” (Annie). Before living in the United States, Annie saw English as this white, western, academic gateway to success and popularity “I can marry to the “handsome foreigner”, with blue eyes, blond hair, sunny smile, and that will change my life, forever!” (Annie). Annie’s belief that English was “...the *only* way that you can communicate...” (Annie, my emphasis) with people outside China was so strong that it even affected her view of famous western figures. In her closing paragraph she describes English as a gateway for studying the works of Albert Einstein and Van Gogh. While these figures are certainly western, and may have known English, they were not writing in it. In these few sentences Annie reveals how her language biases continue to influence her perspectives, despite the knowledge she’s gained. She was able to recognize that her idea of what an English speaker was, and what Americans looked like, was wrong, “There are more faces appear in my eyes, there are more languages appear in my ear, not just the white faces, not just the yellow faces, not just the English, not just the Chinese” (Annie), but her image of western academia is still based on the foundation that everyone successful speaks and writes in English.

Even Mae Tor, who embraced language learning in her narrative, was influenced by media in deciding which languages she wanted to prioritize, “I wanted to start learning French ever since I saw a movie scene in which the students were learning French... Falling in love with Korean entertainment made me want to learn [Korean] so bad...” (Mae Tor). Curiously, while

Mae Tor mentions that she thinks "...it would be so nice if I didn't have to default to [English]" (Mae Tor), and focuses her narrative on four non-English languages, the entirety of her piece is in English. The narrative itself has no evidence of multilingualism outside of anecdotal stories, "I was doing well in [French]. I was prepared for the speaking test, and even the written test" (Mae Tor). In our interview she talks about speaking Tagalog with her parents "Phrases come easily" (Mae Tor), but doesn't include any non-English dialog in her piece. Unlike Annie, who uses Chinese throughout her piece to help express her bilingual experience, Mae Tor uses English exclusively. Mae Tor's narrative focuses more on when she feels comfortable using her different languages, "I met so many people [at school] who also understood [Tagalog], and started to try practicing speaking Tagalog with them. But I still couldn't get myself to speak to my parents" (Mae Tor). When I asked Mae Tor why she thought that was she responded that she hadn't gotten over her "...fear of messing up...the main thought running through my head is that if I do speak Tagalog, it will be wrong in some type of way" (Mae Tor). While Mae Tor feels comfortable practicing her Tagalog with her peers at school, she's still afraid of the possible judgement or embarrassment she might experience at home, whether that be from mispronouncing something or being unable to finish a sentence.

While Annie and Mae Tor's language values were shaped by outside forces, the changes they made to which languages they spoke and when were largely self-driven initiatives. Annie wanted to learn English to impress her friends and adjust to an American lifestyle. Mae Tor wanted to improve her Tagalog as a way of connecting with her Filipino peers and culture. My language narrative focuses on more external sources of language modification. Specifically, how

my parents actively tried to shape my accent, “If I used any of these Rochester pronunciations my mom would pretend she couldn’t understand me, that is until I said the word ‘correctly’” (Scardino). The type of language modification I was participating in did not start as a conscious choice made to achieve success or gain cultural knowledge. As a kid, it was something I passively participated in to appease my parents. It was only when I was older did I make the more conscious choice to continue code switching between Rochester and New York accents, aligning my pronunciations to better match the people I was around, and to avoid judgement, “The Rochester accent was, and is, ridiculed in my house despite Rochester being the place both my parents and my siblings and I call home” (Scardino).

Queens, New York was my parents’ home, and that was the place they wanted us to identify more strongly with. Their accent was so closely tied to their identity that they felt their children should share that with them. Renowned linguist Rosina Lippi-Green talks about the connection between accent and language and identity in her book *English with an Accent*. “When an individual is asked to reject their own language, we are asking them to drop allegiances to the people and places that define them” (Lippi-Green 66). I resented my parents for teaching me that Rochester accents were ugly, and I had to work to connect my mutt of an accent with its own cultural identity, “...my accent isn’t totally one thing or the other, it has a bit of Rochester and a bit of New York. In the end, it’s a representation of my identity as someone with roots in both places” (Scardino). Mae Tor also reflects on this connection between language and identity in her narrative, “Since [Tagalog] is a language that reminds me of my culture and is part of my identity, I want to have a high proficiency in it” (Mae Tor). She connects her desire to

speak Tagalog directly to her identity as a Filipino, “I’m starting to think that I should embrace Tagalog more, because I am proud to be Filipino” (Mae Tor). While Mae Tor and I are using very different aspects of language, we both want our language usage to reflect our roots.

All three of us experienced either our own language biases, the biases of our peers, or both. Annie experienced bias against her accent from her peers, ““Oh, Ni Lai Zi Ji Pi Gu’, ‘Oh, you’re from the bottom of the chicken’” (Annie). Her friends could tell from her accent exactly where she was from, and projected their opinions of that region onto her. At the same time, she had her own assumptions about who spoke the English language, “...Elbert Austin, Jane Austin, Van Gogh resonated me more, their work, their writing, their mind, could help me find the proud and humble in the studying of English literature...” (Annie). Mae Tor was influenced by her Tagalog speaking peers at school to put more of an effort in speaking the language, but still felt she was expected to speak English at home. My parents passed their accent biases on to me, “Even though I love Rochester as my home city, my parents’ message is still with me. I still think Rochester accents, the accents of my home, are ugly” (Scardino).

It isn’t perceptions of language as much as of places that drives these biases. That is to say, Annie’s friends didn’t find her accent less appealing on its own, the same way Annie doesn’t think English as a language is inherently more academic than any other. My parents likely don’t find my the flat As and round Is of my Rochester accent offensive in and of itself. Instead it is the biases against places which are projected on to languages. As Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill wrote in their linguistics book, *Language Myths*, “It turns out that people will often

transfer to a language or dialect their opinions of the people whose language or dialect. Thus, Dante saw the Roman dialect as savage and wretched because this was his opinion of the Roman people at the time” (Bauer & Trudgill 12). It is this effect that contributes to Annie’s desire to learn English, Mae Tor’s desire to learn French and Korean, and me and my parents desire to prioritize a New York accent over a Rochester one. This code switching we participate in is done to align our image of ourselves with the biased image of that language or accent: the English language of the American student, the Tagalog of the proud Filipino, the accent of a “true” New Yorker.

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