

EXPLORING THE CONNECTION AMONG LANGUAGE, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the link among language, culture, identity and difference. It is beneficial to analyse because it contributes on the development of language education. The reason is that language learning and culture are inherent each other. This research's method is the reflective inquiry as the part of qualitative research. This study scrutinises writer's personal experiences concerning the link among language, culture, identity and difference. Hence, the research's subject in this research is the writer's personal experiences. Specifically, the writer's experiences are intonation in expressing anger and interacting with Jakarta people. The related experiences are written and collected by taking notes, and it is directly analysed when the data collected. The study's result indicates that there has been a robust connection among language, culture, identity and difference. One's culture and language can signify their identity and difference. Therefore, the connection between language, culture, identity and difference is required to explore in order to elicit significant impact on the development of language learning.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Identity, Difference, Language learning

A. INTRODUCTION

Analysing the interconnection among language, culture, identity and difference is substantial in the development of language education as language learning and cultural understandings are inherent each other (Kramsch, 1998). The paper will illustrate the link between language and culture can correlate humans' identity and difference. The related process can be explained effectively through a concept called the system of representation.

Hall (2013) reveals that the notion of representation plays an essential role in the process of producing and exchanging meaning between members of a culture. The representation can be defined as the production of the meaning of the concepts existed in humans' mind through language (Hall, 1997). Hence, it can be stated that language constructs meaning obtained from the concepts to communicate it with other people.

Moreover, Hall (2013) asserts that there are two processes of the system of representation. First of all, the mental representation system which leads people to interpret the events and objects built as the concepts on the inside as well as outside peoples' head. That is to say

that if we have a concept for certain things, we can know its meaning vividly without seeing it. To exemplify, people can still signify and conjure the object of “pen”, “glass”, “phone” and others even when you do not see the related objects directly. This process occurs because humans’ thought processes decode the visual perception of the object regarding a concept stored in humans’ head (Hall, 1997). Hence, it can be stated that in order to interpret the world in similar ways, people are required to have the same conceptual maps.

However, having a shared conceptual map is not enough to represent and exchange meanings and concepts. People must have shared language system as well, knowing that language is categorised as the second system of representation which has a function to build meaning (Hall, 2013). It occurs because the shared conceptual map should be translated into a common language which assists us to correlate concepts with spoken sounds, written words and even visual images (Kramersch et al., 1996). These related aspects called “sign”, which is organised into languages (Hall, 2013). Every social community may have different signs in interpreting certain concepts or things (Hall, 2013). To exemplify, in my home country, Indonesia, people who belong to Minangkabau people (a tribe located in West Sumatera, Indonesia) will write “*p-i-t-i*” to refers to a concept of “a tool of the transaction (money)”. On the other hand, Sundanese (a tribe which is existing in West Java, Indonesia) will signify the related concept with word “*d-u-i-t*”. The related disparity exists due to the different linguistic code because of the same social group composed by people who only use the similar linguistic code, such as grammatical, lexical, phonological features and even political rhetoric (Kramersch, 1998). Hence, it can be stated that although language consists of signs organised in various relationships, it can only convey meaning when people have codes. The code plays pivotal roles in humans’ culture which is obtained and internalised unconsciously through our engagements with particular cultures (Kramersch, 1998).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Kramersch’s concept of language and culture

The interconnection between language and culture has been explicated significantly by Kramersch (1998), he reveals that when language is used in the communication contexts, it cannot be separated with culture in multiple and complex ways. In other words, language is known as the principal means to conduct humans’ cultures. Furthermore, the interrelatedness between language and culture is illustrated cohesively in the notion of Insider and Outsider proposed by Kramersch (1998). In this principle, in order to be signified in cultural groups, it is imperative for people to exhibit themselves as insiders against outsiders. It means people, particularly the man in power, having an authority to classify their own culture with others culture through both spoken and written language.

Moreover, humans’ cultural groups could be identified easily by interacting with other members of same groups (Kramersch, 1998). It means that their beliefs, values and common beliefs are reflected through their tool of representation, language. To exemplify, in Minangkabau’s customs, one of the tribes in West Sumatera, Indonesia, Minangkabau people are required to say “*Kato Nan Ampek*” (Ramadhanti, 2018). The “*Kato Nan Ampek*” means Minangkabau people have to speak and communicate with four different ways with four different ages or categorised people; firstly, talking politely and softly to elder people such as interacting with grandparents, parents, brothers/sisters, and others. Then, communicating and caring lovely to younger people such as younger brothers/sisters, nephew/niece and others. Thirdly, speaking and behaving informally with peers, sometimes using humour to strengthen the relationship of friendship. Ultimately, using metaphor to do

interaction between people who have a relationship shaped by marriage such as the relationship between parents-in-law with children-in-law for showing respect each other (Ramadhanti, 2018). Hence, it can be stated that the chosen language could reflect and exhibit humans' culture clearly.

However, Kramsch (1998) also contends that "culture is heterogeneous, even members of the same discourse community all have different biographies and life experiences, age, gender and others" (p. 9). It is to say that there is a likelihood of people who belong to the same culture might have different ways to interpret certain things and concepts. For instance, in age categorization, in my own area located in Dharmasraya Regency, West Sumatera, Indonesia, Minangkabau people who are categorised as older people will say "*k-o-m-a-u*" to signify a concept of a strip of leather or other materials used, typically around the waist in order to hold in clothes (belt). On the contrary, youngsters will say or mark the related concept as "*i-k-e-k p-i-n-g-g-a-n-g*". But, to my understanding which relies on the notion given by Baker and Wright (2017), it is only the matter of "language shifting" in which the existence of word "*k-o-m-a-u*" has been replaced by "*i-k-e-k p-i-n-g-g-a-n-g*" to construct the concept of the real "belts". As a result, the younger people who belong to Minangkabau tribe prefer saying "*i-k-e-k p-i-n-g-g-a-n-g*" instead of "*k-o-m-a-u*". In fact, Fishman (1996, as cited in Risager, 2006) depicts that language has been considered as a crucial part of cultural groups because those who intend to understand their cultural fully must master its language as well. Moreover, Kramsch (1998) asserts that there is an interconnection between the language spoken by members of cultural groups and their groups' identity.

2. Woodward's concept of identity and difference

Based on Woodward's explanation, identity itself can be classified into two various parts, which are essentialism and non-essentialism (Woodward, 1997). The former means an identity which is based on nature, and it is seen as fixed and unchanging. For instance, race, gender, kinship, gender and sexuality and subverted biological changes (Woodward, 1997). On the other hand, the latter is seen as contingent in which humans' identity will never remain static. This classified identity is categorised as the product of an intersection of various components, political and cultural discourses (Clark, 2013; Woodward, 1997). For instance, school uniforms, prior to 1999, all of the Indonesian school institutions had required all of Indonesian men students to wear short-jeans studying in schools. This related rule was regulated under Soeharto's regime, one of former Indonesian Presidents. The certain regulation automatically changed when the next Indonesian president, Habibie, replaced Soeharto at that time. The Habibie's regime asked Indonesian men students wearing long-jeans in schools, and this regulation has been implemented until now. Based on the example above, it is apparent that identity will always change and improve, and it might be different all the time.

Interestingly, the difference itself will signify the individual or cultural identities. In other words, difference marks out certain identities from other identities and fosters distinctions (Woodward, 1997). The marking of the difference occurs through the symbolic system of representation and in the form of social exclusion, and these two forms of symbolic and social exclusion constructed through a particular operation called classificatory system (Woodward, 1997). A classificatory system is categorised as a system which is utilised to applying a principle of difference to populations and dividing their characteristics into minimally two opposing groups (Woodward, 1997). To exemplify, the writer could distinguish between Minangkabau tribe and Sundanese tribe and consider himself belong to

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Minangkabau tribe instead of Sundanese tribe because the Minangkabau culture values reflected in the writers' habit.

The related habits and characters are different compared to Sundanese's identity. The disparities could be in accents, written and spoken language systems, traditional dresses and many other differences. Based on the example mentioned above, it can be seen that how culture through the system of linguistic features marks out difference are important to our understanding of identity. Thus, it can be concluded that language and culture could correlate humans' identity and difference, and these four aspects cannot have separated each other.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this research was qualitative research. It is selected because this research aims to explore and express one's experiences. In particular, the researcher attempts to express his personal experiences. It links to an idea expressed by Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008), stating that the qualitative research can be applied to explore and understand meaning and experiences of individuals. This kind of research is called reflective inquiry (Ross & Hannay, 1986). In reflective inquiry, it examines the personal experiences of the researchers themselves (Lyons, Halton, & Freidus, 2013). Therefore, the research subject is the writer's personal experiences (Cunliffe, 2003).

Data in qualitative research is in the form of words, actions, written data sources, photos, and statistics (Carter & Little, 2007). In this study, data collection is carried out through the researcher's own writing relating to his life experiences and collecting supporting documents. Data analysis in qualitative research can be carried out in conjunction with the research process, for example when data is collected and written (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014). Hence, when data in this research is collected and written, it is further analyzed by the researcher comprehensively.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interrelatedness among language, culture, identity and difference would be able to be comprehended efficiently by scrutinising our personal life experience. Firstly, it starts connecting them by describing my first experience regarding intonation affected by Minangkabau tribe's customs. Then, I will also describe and analyse a story with my friends who came from Jakarta, as my second experience. The findings will be discussed as follow:

1. The first story (my distinctive intonation in expressing anger to my mother)

I was born and raised in a Minangkabau family with strong Minangkabau roots that made me understand Minangkabau culture and values in deeply. For instance, Minangkabau culture has been requiring us to speak in four different ways with four ages categorised of people, which is called *kato nan ampek* (Ramadhanti, 2018). We were particularly asked to talk softly and politely to elder people. One day, my mother suddenly asked me to stop playing football when I played it with my colleagues in the green field. Then, honestly, I was angry and disappointed to my mother at that time. But the way I expressed my anger to my mother looked like "strange" due to my intonation. Although in expressing my anger, I still spoke softly to my mother because it was affected by Minangkabau customs (*kato nan ampek*) in which I had to speak politely and softly to elder people, my mother. The existence

of the value had given me such an awkward moment, and I felt that it was significant to my life. Interestingly, the way I expressed my anger by speaking softly to my mother was seen unusual by one of my friends who came from another tribe in Indonesia, which was the Batak tribe. He told me that my way of expressing the anger was funny.

The analysis of the story above

There are some points that can be taken and examined from the story above. Firstly, the experience above significantly correlates with a principle explained by Kramsch (1998), saying that cultural groups' values, customs and common beliefs could be reflected through group members' language. The related interplay was drawn by my distinctive speech regarding intonation which showed my cultural group customs. This related custom has remarkably affected the way I speak, particularly my intonation since I have been asked by my cultural customs to speak politely and softly to elder people (Ramadhanti, 2018). In this context, I used my smooth intonation to my mother even though I expressed my anger. This distinctive way seemed strange and unusual because other people might express their anger by shouting to people who make them satisfied and angry. I could not express my anger like other people did since I have been asked by my cultural customs to speak politely and softly to elder people in every circumstance. Hence, it can be concluded that language and culture have strong interplay, and both of them correlated each other.

Secondly, the way I spoke politely and softly to my mother above could be linked as well with a principle of language, in which language that we use has a function to share meaningful ideas (Hall, 1997). In this context, when I spoke with low and soft intonation to my mother means that I showed my politeness to elder people, particularly my mother. Whereas, if I spoke loudly at that time, probably my mother would judge me as a rude person who did not regard her as well as our Minangkabau's customs. It means my mother and I have had the similar ideas and concepts in our head regarding expressing the concept of the politeness and rudeness. Consequently, my mother automatically understood at the time that I still showed my politeness to her because I still speak with a low intonation.

Thirdly, another point that can be taken from the story above is the principle of the difference that can signify the individuals' identities (Woodward, 1997). In this view, my identity could be categorised as a son who showed significant respect for my mother. It can be seen and portrayed through my low intonation. On the contrary, my mother's identity as a parent could be reflected through her way in delivering her speech for communicating with me. She gets used to speaking loudly to me whether in daily conversations or in expressing her anger. This situation occurs because has not been constrained by our Minangkabau's customs to speak loudly to me since her role as my parent. Hence, it can be stated as well that these disparities happened through the classificatory system, in which I was classified as a respected son, while my mother was categorised as a parent who had freedom to express her feeling to me. In line with the detailed illustration, Woodward (1997) asserts that the classificatory system is used to divide populations' characteristics into at least two different or opposing things, like us/them.

Ultimately, the way one of my friends who came from another tribe, Batak tribe, seeing my unusual and distinctive ways in expressing anger with low intonation links with the notion of insider and outsider (Kramsch, 1998). In this view, my Batak friend could be categorised as an outsider who did not recognise my Minangkabau's cultural values and customs that made him confused with, I had done in expressing my anger. This

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phenomenon naturally happened since my Batak friend and I had a different way of interpreting something. In this context, my Batak friend might have another way to express his anger and based on a study conducted by Tobing, Panggabean, and Sinar (2016). Batak people tend to speak loudly in an aggressive manner.

2. The second story (interacting with Jakarta people)

After completing my undergraduate degree, I left my village and moved to the capital of Indonesia, Jakarta. I saw the Jakarta people, particularly youngsters who live in Jakarta, tend to use “slang” language (Bowden, 2015), which made me realise that they were different from me. To exemplify, three of my Jakarta friends and I stayed up watching a football match on television together while I received short-message-services from my girlfriend. The message sent by my girlfriend was funny which made me laugh at myself. Suddenly, one of my friends, namely Tomi, said to me that “*kamu alig*” which made me kept silent. In contrast, the rest of my friends guffawed together while I got confused why they laughed. After they stopped laughing, they told me that they laughed because I was teased by Tomi as a crazy person when he said “*kamu alig*” to me. Apparently, the meaning of “*kamu alig*” is “*you are crazy*” in English. But, I did not notice it since the word “*alig*” considered as Jakarta people’s slang which refers to “*gila*” in Bahasa Indonesia and “*crazy*” in English; however, after I socialized more with them, I got used to using slang as well which assisted me to communicate effectively with them.

The analysis of the story above

There are three points that can be analysed in the second experience. Firstly, in the contention, that difference could signify humans’ cultural identities explained by Hall (2013) is relevant to my story with three of my friends who came from the metropolitan city, Jakarta. In this occasion, I felt that there was myriad of disparities among us. To exemplify, I lived in a rural area located in West Sumatra which made me confused with their slang. On the contrary, they lived in a big city namely Jakarta, which has been associated with modernity, and even Jakarta people have been known as inhabitants who creatively modify the Indonesian language structurally and phonetically (Bowden, 2015). The modification of this Indonesian language called slang (Bowden, 2015). As a consequence, I did not understand my Jakarta friend’s joke when he said “*alig*” to me. It occurs because “*alig*” is known as Jakarta people’s slang that refers to “*crazy*” in English, and “*gila*” in the Indonesian language. Jakarta people creatively changed the structure of word from “*gila*” from the backward to be “*alig*” in order to create their slang. Based on the related differences, I could realise that my cultural identity was not similar to them.

In addition, the story with my Jakarta friends above might be linked as well with a notion proposed by Hall (2013). Hall (2013) asserts that to communicate and understand effectively each other, people must have a similar conceptual map as well as shared language system. In this context, my Jakarta friends and I might have a same concept of “people who smile by themselves” categorised as “crazy people”, and the related concept is known and popular in our country, Indonesia. However, my Jakarta friends had another language system to represent the related concept in which they used their slang “*alig*”. Consequently, I did not understand what they meant since I use a word “*gila*” to represent the related concept. So, that is why Hall (2013) asserts that having a shared conceptual map is not enough to represent

and exchange meanings and concepts because the related process requires shared language system as well.

Lastly, in the last part of the story above, I had been affected by my friends to use slang after having more socialisation with them. This condition resulted in the development of my new identity as a youngster who could use slang. This significant development could be seen through my adjustment to slang, particularly word “*alig*”. For instance, a month ago, when one of my friends in my WhatsApp group, namely Hafizah, sent word “*alig*” to humiliate my friend (namely Dika) in our WhatsApp group. I could relate and understand the related word which made me laughed directly. Hence, it is true that identity is categorised as a continually changing process, called the non-essential view (Hall, 1997; Woodward, 1997). Moreover, Identity could be influenced by a relation involved in various socialisations in which we participate and interact with (Woodward, 1997).

E. CONCLUSION

Based on these two stories and the given analyses above, it is apparent that the connection between language and culture is crucial to correlate peoples’ identity and difference. It can be portrayed through my distinctive speech regarding intonation which is correlated with my culture’s customs, resulted in the shaping of my identity and difference with the others. Moreover, the differences with other people could be seen clearly in the second story (moved to Jakarta), when I did not understand my Jakarta friend’s joke due to the language system disparities between us.

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