



# Interplay of Language Policy, Ethnic Identity and National Identity in Five Different Linguistic Settings

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## Abstract

This study, as a concise and critical literature review, examines related studies that investigated the interplay of the three constructs: ethnic identity, national identity and language policy. To do this, five related research articles were located and their similarities and differences in terms of their findings and methodologies were compared and contrasted. The literature review reveals that the researchers have utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain data. The findings show that ethnic identity is the contextualization of history, beliefs, customs, spiritual values, etc. of a speech community which practice their culture and values via the medium of language. National identity which emerges in time can be defined as an embodiment of the all common cultural values and social practices of different ethnic groups inside the borders of any country, and this is also manifested through a common language used as the formal and official language of their country. However, identity is a notion that remains rather illusive in its operationalization. Finally, language policy may be representative of a body of law, regulation and authoritative linguistic planned programs which are imposed on societies by governments. Language policies as nation building activities can improve the sense of nationality and reduce ethnic discords, and in the event may also suppress the maintenance or development of ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, nationality, ethnic and national identities, language policy

## 1. Background

In speech communities, languages are employed to convey meanings and to practice social lives. Spolsky (2004) describes linguistic ecologies as contextualized performances of linguistic units. As a sign system, any language is capable of conveying meanings semantically and in addition, it is loaded with cultural and social values (Kramsch, 2009). People identify themselves, other people and their surroundings through the use of their language(s) in their social interaction. Kramsch (2009: 3) asserts that: people “view their language as a symbol of their social identity” while Tong and Cheung (2011) extend language as a reflection of lifestyle as well as a carrier of cultural and social identities of people who practice that particular language in a specific geographical domain.

This study, as a concise and critical literature review, examines five research articles on the issues of language policy, ethnic and national identity. Attempts are made to reflect on similarities and differences found on the relationship between language policy and ethnic and national identity in five different linguistic settings. To do this, firstly, brief definitions of the constructs, language policy, ethnicity, nationality and identity are presented. Secondly, the five selected articles are discussed. And finally, a summary and conclusion try to discuss and integrate the findings of the study.

### 1.1 Ethnicity and nationality



Ethnicity and nationality, as manifestations of two interwoven sociocultural units, i.e. ethnic group and nation, are employed to define people which share cultural and social values which may be distinct or similar in certain communities (Fishman, 1975). Common values in speech communities are culturally and socially expressed and communicated by people via their current discursive practices (Foucault, 2002). Discursive practices can be part of the accepted cultural values which are culturally transmitted through generations as social heritage. Besides, discursive practices as social norms are socially institutionalized mainly through the exertion of power in societies (ibid).

Ethnicity and nationality are distinguishable and marked by geopolitical borders of countries. Fishman (1975) defines an ethnic group as a speech community which consists of local residents of a land who may live there for generations, but a nation is a new phenomenon which is only perceivable within the internationally accepted geopolitical border of a country.

### *1.2 Language policy*

Language policy and language planning which are used interchangeably in sociolinguistics studies as connected entities, refer to a government's purposeful efforts that affect the application, structure as well as the acquisition of a language in a speech community (Cooper, 1989). Thus, a language policy is implemented to cause preplanned changes in the society concerned. Although language planning is considered as quite a recent discipline in language studies, it has long been practiced as part of a government activity in empires throughout history (Spolsky, 2004). As examples of language policies in the 20th century, one can refer to language programs in Iran (Sadeghi, 2001), Malaysia (Rajandran, 2008; Gill, 2005), and very recently after the shift of power, Hong Kong (Lai, 2011).

The results of language planning and policy programs are often seen in the modification of linguistic behavior of some groups of people. The reasons for the program differ from one country to another, a common one is to maintain nationalizing efforts and another is to implement language modernization or to acquire a new language or languages deemed important for nationhood (Dakhir and Abid, 2011). Although different researchers may define language policy differently, all of them are generally agreed on the main purposes behind it – that of status planning and corpus planning (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Cooper 1989). Status planning deals with the promotion of a vernacular as the formal or official language of a country. In most times, it is carried out for de-colonization purposes by the newly established independent states in order to promote the feeling of patriotism among their people (Dakhir and Abid, 2011). Status planning may result in the advent of a language to establish a national identity in independent countries (ibid). Corpus planning, on the other hand, as a linguistic activity, tends to modify a language in terms of its phonology, morphology, syntax and lexis. Thus, corpus planning is perceived as a language policy with a direction towards modernization and standardization. Corpus planning is viewed as a complement to status planning (Wright, 2004; Cooper, 1989).

### *1.3 Identity*

Identity formation is heavily impacted by language use. Hall (2002:32) defines identity as “a reflexive product of social, historical and political contexts of an individual's lived experiences”. Members of social groups, through the use of their language, distinguish between themselves and members of other social groups as insiders and outsiders. The insider-outsider image of people is one manifestation of people's cultural identities which in turn could also be indicative of their ethnic identities. This sense of identity as a member of a social group motivates particular people, who may also have common physical features as a specific race, and may have a feeling of social importance and historical continuity to relate to each other with common values and aspirations.

There are researchers such as Sugita (2000) who distinguish between cultural identity and social identity. This view of identity defines cultural identity as the connection between people united with a common history and common cultural practices. The related activities are mainly performed through the use of their mother tongue. Social identity, on the other hand is defined an embodiment of social practices that are institutionalized by legislatures and are the results of power relations and dominant ideologies in societies which again are mostly performed via the medium of language (ibid). The individual members of a society, because of their belonging to a specific cultural group as well as of being the citizen of a particular polity, are involved in some discursive practices that are an amalgam of their ethnic identity and their national identity. As a result, linguistic ecologies are an ethnography of languages which encompasses the cultural and social identities of the language users in the domain of their lifestyle (Spolsky, 2004:2153).



## **2. Statement of the problem**

In spite of the extensive body of literature on language policy, ethnicity, nationality and identity construction, what seems to be under-researched are the effects of the states' language policies on local identities and the construction of national identities in different linguistic ecologies. Thus, as a literature review, the present paper, tries to investigate how governmental language policies may impact ethnic identities and how they are influential in the formation of national identities. To achieve this goal, five research studies on the issues of language policy and identity formation in different linguistic settings are located and discussed. Attempts are made to compare and contrast the studies in terms of their methodologies and findings.

## **3. Methodology**

Creswell (1994) argues that in order to conduct a literature review, a summary of the pertinent literature; i.e. a literature map is useful. By scrutinizing the literature map, themes of interest can be highlighted which in turn will lead to formation of different categories that serve to illuminate certain phenomena. This strategy was employed to carry out the present study and major themes were emerged from the interplay of three constructs, that of language policy, ethnic identity and national identity inductively.

In order to form the literature map, firstly, the key terms 'language policy', 'ethnic identity' and 'national identity' were searched. This was performed by pinpointing electronic databases such as Eric, Educational Research Complete (EBSCO) and that compiled by Taylor and Francis. By doing so, some relevant journal articles were identified. Secondly, the search was furthered by Google resources for some of the articles which were cited in the identified articles.

Out of 50 scrutinized articles, five were identified as being capable of presenting empirical data in relation to the interplay between language policy, ethnic identity and national identity. Hence, a literature map of the five studies was formed. The identified articles revealed that the studies were carried out based on survey questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. (Appendix A as a literature map summarizes the necessary information about the writers, their methodologies and their sites of data collection).

## **4. Findings**

Reflecting on the central issues relating to language policy, ethnic and national identity within the five reviewed articles (Appendix A), similarities and differences were pinpointed and discussed. With respect to similarities, the five articles show a consistent perception of identity. All the five reviewed articles are in agreement that identity formation as a process is heavily impacted by language use. The five authors conceive identity as a complicated process which arises from social interaction mainly via the medium of language. Lai (2011) states that identity as a complex social phenomenon, is the result of language use. Lai adds that identity encompasses different aspects of social life and sometimes is a site of struggle. Tong and Cheung (2011) describe language practice as a base for the construction of social and personal identity. Brown (2005) presents a thorough discussion of the effects of language use on identity formation of Malaysian students. In his detailed description of the discursive practices in the Malaysian educational domain, he argues that since the introduction of Moral Education implemented in reaction to the 1969 ethnic riots, ethnic tension in the country has been relieved and the sense of national identity improved. Javadi and Javadi (2008) emphasize that national identity gives a binding knowledge in the form of an officially presented picture of self which is imposed on nation by the dominant language policies of the countries. And finally, Elias (2008) defines national identity as giving a shared sense of solidarity and allegiance of all the ethnic groups who live inside the borders of a country.

With respect to the differences among the five studies, the focus of Brown (2005), Lai (2011), and Tong and Cheung (2011) is on language policy in the newly established independent countries which they evaluate as a reaction against colonization. As a result, they have a focus on the emergence of post colonial national identity. Javadi, and Javadi (2008), however, concentrate their study on national identity in another sense. They investigated the Iranian Kurds who as an ethnic group, use Persian as their second language for educational purposes. The authors investigate the effects of the use of media such as the internet on the national identity of the Iranian Kurds, but they do not provide any evidence of the sense of national identity among the Kurdish ethnic minority in Iran. Elias (2008) discusses and evaluates identity from a different point of view. He argues about how the sense of local identity can assist in the retention of local languages in contrast to the swift growth of international languages such as English. Elias' study is restricted to just presenting the problem. He does not propose any practical measures for the maintenance of local identities among the people who are facing challenges in face of globalization.



Furthermore, in terms of differences, the five articles utilize different methodologies in approaching their studies. Lai (2011) employs a mixed qualitative and quantitative method for gathering its data. He triangulates the numerical data with in-depth group interviews which enrich his study to a greater extent in comparison with the other reviewed articles. Javadi and Javadi (2008) use the quantitative method of survey questionnaire and do not offer information via qualitative means. Tong and Cheung (2011) use ethnography and document analysis to present a rich description of lifestyle of the people in their site of study. Brown (2005), on the other hand, provides an in-depth description of the educational discursive practices in Malaysia and examines the effects of educational discursive practices on national identity formation of the Malaysian pupils. Finally, Elias (2008) restricts his study to a brief historical account of the linguistic ecology in Canada. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity formation as a process is heavily impacted by language use and policy.</li> <li>• Identity encompasses different aspects of social life and sometimes is a site of struggle.</li> <li>• National identity gives a binding knowledge in the form of an officially presented picture of self which is imposed on nation by the dominant language policies of the countries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lai (2011), Tong and Cheung (2011) and Brown (2005), concentrate on language policy in the newly established independent countries as a reaction against colonization. Their findings suggest that language policy has impact on the emergence of national identity.</li> <li>• Javadi and Javadi (2008) focus on the sense of national identity among Iranian Kurds who as an ethnic group use Persian as their second language for educational purposes.</li> <li>• Elias (2008) argues on how the sense of the local identity can assist the retention of local languages in contrast to the swift growth of international languages such as English.</li> <li>• The five researchers employ different quantitative and/or qualitative methodologies to conduct their studies.</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The literature review shows that language is the pivotal point around which social life is materialized and negotiated by language users. Moreover, the review of the imposed language policies on the five different linguistic settings shows that people by the practice of their language(s) construct their subjectivities. These findings are in agreement with Weedon (1977:21, cited in Gu, 2011) that contends “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed.” (p. 19). In the light of such subjectivities, it is not surprising that identity is a site of struggle.

Language programs, as governmental policies, are instruments of power and they reflect the dominant ideologies of the states. They are imposed on societies and have undeniable impact on identity construction of people. Brown (2005) by examining the educational discursive practices among the Malaysian youths illustrates how language policies may result in improving the sense of solidarity among the people of a nation. Javadi and Javadi (2008) examine the effects of the global mass media like the internet and satellite TV programs on the sense of local identities. However, they conclude that whenever ethnic groups have a chance to practice their mother tongues in the available domains, the local identities thrive and are not threatened by language globalization. Besides, the literature review illustrates that ethnic groups who speak a language other than the formal language of a country



are not seen as a threat against national unity, as it was so perceived in the apartheid regime in South Africa (Kamwendo, 2006). In imposing an official language policy, ethnicity and nationality can still exist in harmony with each other and both can assist each other mutually to grow and develop in societies. The Kurds as an ethnic group who live in the Middle East region illustrate how local identities may grow in parallel to national identities.

The Kurdish people are a major ethnic group but they are scattered in Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria in the Middle East region (Encyclopedia Americana, 1994). A Kurdish can be a citizen of Turkey by nationality but he may be different from his cousin who may, by chance, lives in Iran, Iraq or Syria. Both are members of the same ethnic group and they communicate using the Kurdish language as their mother tongue, and via the Kurdish language, practice common beliefs and customs are culturally transmitted to them. However, the Kurdish citizen of Turkey may study Turkish at an educational center in Istanbul or may utilize Turkish whenever he has contact with an official organization in Turkey. He may be Turkish in nationality and have full access to the country's beliefs and culture, being well versed in matters that ranged from the country's technological advancement to the country's athletic or sports achievements. In comparison, the linguistic ecology can be quite different for his imaginary cousin in Iran. In his educational domain, the Iranian Kurdish study in the Persian language as it is the formal language of the country and whoever he works for or whenever he has to communicate with a national organization in Iran, he utilizes Persian. These different language applications or discursive practices (Foucault, 2002) of an ethnic group reflect how prevailing ideologies could permeate and modify ethnic identities and this act is reinforced by national legislatures of countries in the form of language policies.

Foucault (2002) defines discursive practices as the construction as well as the reflection of social reality through social interaction or 'discourse'. In turn, discourse is impacted by people's identity, ideology, belief, traditions and power relations in any given society. In harmony with Foucault, Fairclough (2001:16) defines the act of language use in its social context as 'discourse'. Social context is impacted by institutional, political, cultural and historical settings where language is put into use (Widdowson, 2007, Fairclough, 2001). As a result, whenever governmental language policies are imposed on societies, they provoke new ideological values that are put into use via the prevailing discursive practices, which in turn are influential in identity formation.

In conclusion, a study on ethnic and national identity would touch on many issues. They could span history, and cross geopolitical boundaries, cultures, beliefs and social practices. In addition, there could be an external formal force in the form of an imposed language policy which promotes a language as the formal and official language of a country. This imposition reflects nation building and identity formation activities especially in newly established countries which often are in search of nationhood. In the act of social crafting, language planners should not forget that society is also built up on the use of the mother tongue which plays a significant role in ethnic affiliation. To neglect the rights of the ethnic minorities in using their mother tongues may result in social discord as shown in South Africa during the apartheid regime (Kamwendo, 2006). Thus, the national identity suffers together with other values when a state of anarchy exists. However, when language policy is in agreement with the nation's needs, social disharmony can be relieved and a sense of unity (developed from a sense of national identity) improves. In a multilingual country, such as Malaysia, notions of ethnic identity, national identity, and language policy are worthy issues of exploration. These trajectories intertwine to weave and inform on a linguistic landscape that gives rich comments about language in use and on the lively emergence of identity and nationality. Empirical evidence can be systematically gathered through means as illustrated in the studies reviewed, to document the meaningful sequence and consequence of the related language events to explain stated or emergent hypothesis.

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**Appendix A: A summary of the reviewed articles**

Study	Title	Setting	Type of data	Finding
Lai (2011)	Cultural identity and language attitudes into the second decade of postcolonial Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Quantitative and qualitative	Despite the sovereignty change, the majority of the informants still retained a strong local identity, while only a small percentage demonstrated identification with the nation (motherland China)
Elias (2008)	The Implication of Modernity for Language Retention and Related Identity Issues: Applying the Thought of Charles Taylor	Canada	Document analysis	Modernization and globalization may lead to the destruction of local languages and local identities
Javadi, A. and Javadi, M. (2008)	National identity and globalization: A survey among undergraduate students in Islamabad and Gilaneghrab cities (Iran)	Iran (Islamabad and Gilaneghrab cities)	Survey questionnaire	Mass media had little effects on the local identities in the sites of study
Tong, H. K. and Cheung, L. H. (2011)	Cultural identity and language: A proposed framework for cultural globalization and glocalization.	Hong Kong and Singapore	Document analysis, ethnography	Language policies may be employed for nation building activities and decolonization in the newly established countries
Brown (2005)	Making ethnic citizens: The politics and practice of education in Malaysia	Malaysia	Document analysis	Malaysian language policies, by instilling Moral Education in the educational domain, have been influential in the emergence and improvement of national identity in the among the nation