

A Review on Language, Power and Agency

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Abstract

Language, power and agency are associated terminologies in the sense that the power of language can influence others and construct reality. Similarly, agency uses the power of language to control and govern others by imposing ideology and knowledge. This paper aims to review how power and agency are associated with language and control others through language. Likewise, this paper critically analyses how the power of language is responsible for social inequality. Since the nature of this paper is document analysis, I have reviewed available literature in various contexts including the concept of Foucault, Gramsci, Nietzsche, Derrida, Austin and Althusser; and show the relationship between language and power and the way how agency exercises power and reproduce inequality in society. The analysis of various studies reveals that language has the power to govern truth because the truth is the product of language games. Similarly, it shows that agency uses the power of language to dominate others such as male agency to dominate females, doctors and priest's agency to control others through language. This paper is important to develop an analytical framework to illustrate the role of agency to impose the power of language to control various social activities.

Keywords: *Agency, ideology, inequality, language and power*

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication; it is a tool to determine power, and agency uses the power of language to influence others. Language can play a powerful role to rank the status of people in society by using its varieties like standard and non-standard dialects. For example, people with high status use a standard dialect whereas those who are in low socioeconomic status may not. Likewise, agency, which is context-specific, is people's capacity (Ahearn, 2001) to exercise power, and it differs from society to society. It is not only an individual's power to achieve something; rather the environment can play a significant role to develop a person's agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). So, agency gives authority to a person, and language is associated with agency and power (Duranti, 2004; Kramarae et al., 1984) in communities. Any act of speaking may involve some sort of agency, and when we speak, we try to establish a reality that has the power for affecting

whoever listens to us, irrespective of the originally intended audience.

The paper has answered two research questions: in what ways language and agency are interrelated to exercise power, and how the power of language reproduces social inequality. So, this paper aims to review how agency and power are associated with language and control others through language. Similarly, it shows how the power of language can be responsible for social inequality including gender discrimination. Based on these research objectives, I have reviewed the related literature available in various search engines as the nature of the paper is documentary analysis. This paper includes a brief introduction to language concerning the social roles that it can perform, the concept of agency, language, power and ideology, and the relationship between language, power, and agency. The main focus of the paper is to show the relationship between language and power, and the role of agency to demonstrate power in various socio-cultural aspects through language. Similarly, following the concept of some philosophers and linguists like Foucault, Gramsci, Nietzsche, Derrida, Austin, and Althusser, this paper reflects how language plays a power game to show power relations and to reproduce inequality in society associated with human agency.

Although language is a broad area of study among social researchers across the world, the study of language and agency in relation to power may be a less researched area. So, the paper can be a useful literature for those who want to study in this area in the future. Moreover, this paper may be important to develop an analytical framework of language and its power in society and the relationship between language and agency to establish power in various social activities.

Introduction to Language

Language, a means of communication, can perform more social roles rather than simply communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences between or among people. Fairclough (2001) views language as a form of social practice, social process, and socially conditioned process. So, we cannot separate language from society; it is a part of society because several linguistic and social phenomena are interchangeable. The way people communicate either verbally or in written forms may have socio-cultural effects. Similarly, language activities that people perform in social contexts can be a part of social processes and practices. For instance, the debates on social or political issues in society are not only the expression of language; they reflect socio-political discourses in society. However, the relationship between language and society is not symmetrical (Fairclough, 2001); rather they have whole-part relations.

Many linguists and philosophers have different views about language and the role it performs in society. Language is central to Gramsci's historical materialism. For Gramsci, Language lies at the centre of the relationship between coercion and consent (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Gramsci states that the growing use of English as a global language in a

capitalist global political economy is a hegemony (Gramsci, 2011). Because of this ideology, the English language is ruling over other languages of various ethnic communities as a powerful language. Gramsci differs from Saussure on the point that the role of history and the development of language through the process of metaphor. Structural linguists like Saussure view that language is a complex system of signifiers (concepts) and signifiers. In contrast to structuralists, the poststructuralists like Foucault and Baudrillard reject the concept that systematic knowledge is possible. The poststructuralists reject Saussure's structuralism and the notion of totality and stability of structures (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Foucault views that the syntactic and semantic structures do not serve to determine the discursive meaning (Hall, 2001). The syntactically correct phrase may lack discursive meaning, but the sentence which is not correct grammatically may be discursively meaningful. Conversely, deconstructionists reject the centrality of meaning and emphasise the free play of meaning. They view that language itself is unstable and arbitrary. Similarly, Austin (1962) introduced speech act theory as a philosophy of language, and argues that instead of focusing on semantic and word meaning, we should focus on the activities people do to use his/her language and the acts they perform when they speak (Petrey, 2016). Austin distinguishes between three acts: the locutionary act (sentence meaning), the illocutionary act (the act goes beyond a locutionary act), and the perlocutionary act (which is the effects upon the thoughts, feelings, or action of the audience).

Finally, regarding the social phenomenon of language, many scholars view that language is a social activity, not the sentence or even the conversation but rather speech acts (Austin, 1962) and speech events (Jakobson, 1960) Within these contexts, social reality is constructed along with the construction of meaning, and language not only reflects an already existing social reality; it supports to create that reality (Levinson & Gumperz, 1996). So, language serves social functions and while serving them, agency can exercise the power of language to keep some units up and some down based on various social parameters including sociocultural status.

The Concept of Agency

The concept of agency has paid much attention to social science over the last few decades. The individuals' capacity to do something in their own free choices and to impose these choices over others is agency. The prominent post structural social theorists like Giddens (1979) and Bourdieu (1977) brought the term agency into the social sciences to define a social action theory that would identify the role performed by social actors in the production and reproduction of social systems, and to overcome the theoretical tendency of the structuralist and the Marxist. A social theory of agency can integrate several claims based on language use and language structure. Duranti (2004) clarifies the concept of agency with the help of three properties: the degree of control over their own behaviour, whose actions in the world affect other entities, and whose actions are the object of

evaluation, and these properties of entities are interconnected. All languages have various ways of representing agency, for example, several grammatical and discourse devices represent agency in language. However, there may be variety in representing agency within the same language or across languages. Thus, agency and language are intertwined.

Agency is defined as an attribute or power of an individual, void of the historical, sociocultural and institutional context (Jones & Norris, 2005). For Emirbayer and Mische (1998), "agency is a temporally embedded process of social engagement" informed by an individual's past experiences, future directions and current practices (p. 963). When we characterise someone's capacity to act in the world, it is his/her agency. Material and social world can enable us to understand a person's agency (Goller & Harteis, 2017). Gallagher (2017) underlines the idea that agency "is not a property of one individual brain, mind, or organism, but is relational" (p. 3).

Agency is always associated with a context, and inseparable from the context. Agency is not an individual power that someone has, but it is something one achieves by employing an environment. In this regard, Biesta and Tedder (2007) opine that the attainment of agency depends on the availability of sociocultural and economic resources within a specific environment. In this sense, an individual effort along with available resources and structural factors may contribute to the achievement of agency. Finally, Ahearn (2001) defines agency as the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act. It means all actions in the society are socio-culturally intervened in their production and interpretation. The conceptions of agency may differ from society to society because the form of agency develops out of a specific sociocultural context. It arises from the social, political, and cultural dynamics of a particular time and place. Sociocultural contexts and institutions like language can help to empower agency in society.

Language, Power and Ideology

Language is a common form of social behaviour. To regulate social behaviour, all social institutions use a specific category of discourse. For example, the language used in a news story is different from that of chat shows on TV. It means that every social institution has common assumptions called ideologies and the ideology may have a connection with the language of that institution. Such ideologies are associated with language and power. The form of language that people use reflects social differences in terms of race (white and black), class (rich and poor) and position or role (doctor and patient). Althusser (2010) argues that power relations are always asymmetrical, and these relations as a part of its ideologies are negotiated through its discourse.

Power is the capacity of an individual or group or institution to influence the behaviour of others for intended goals or effects. In this regard, Bourdieu (1977) defines power as the capacity of agents to achieve a certain outcome through their intervention or non-

intervention. Power, which involves various social activities, is closely linked to ideology. Out of the four forms of power (economic power, political power, coercive power, and symbolic power) identified by Thompson (1984) in society, symbolic power is connected with language behaviour.

Regarding language and power, Nietzsche (1954) argues that language governs truth, and the truth is a dynamic and human construction. He further says that all truth is metaphors and truth is the product of language games. Language has the power to manipulate truth as truths are illusions. For Foucault (1980), power is truth, and power can be everywhere, in the classroom, in family, in language, etc. He talks about discursive power. History is a product of discourse, and discourse is a product of language. Nobody understands history without understanding language. An episteme, the dominant discourse of a particular period, decides knowledge and truth. Similarly, Hegemony, the manifestations of power, is the exercise of power by consent of those on whom it is being exercised (Gramsci, 2011). Earlier, hegemony was a political concept, but later on, Gramsci used the term in social and cultural practices including linguistic hegemony. Hegemony, one of the symbolic manifestations of power, has a close connection with ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to exercise power in everyday activities.

Power is unequally distributed between social classes or caste or racial groups or sex in any system of governance. Different studies in the field of language, power, and ideology reflect that the use of various forms of social dialects divides people based on their power relation. In this way, language is a major intervention in the social construction of reality. Several studies (Fairclough, 2001; Hodge & Kress, 1993; Wodak, 1989) constituting the role of language show that there exist the relations between language and ideology in different levels of language like syntactic and semantic levels.

Relation between Language, Power and Agency

Language can be a tool to dominate some people by others exercising unequal power relations. An individual's capacity as an agency may use authority to influence and control others through language. Several examples including how standard and non-standard social dialects associate with prestige depend on the power of their users, and how people exercise power in conversation and various forms of talk between or among them. For example, the Nepali dialect used by the high-class families in Nepal like Shah and Rana is considered a superior dialect to the dialects used by the working-class people. Similarly, the dialect used by the high-class family is normally developed into the standard language. For example, the social dialects which were the East Midland dialect spoken by the merchant class people in London were developed into Standard English at the end of the mediaeval period (Fairclough, 2001). The English dialects of the Black American are considered less prestigious compared to the White American dialects (Kramarae et al., 1984). These examples show that the agency of socio-economically high-class people impose the power

of language over the marginalised groups to control them. Likewise, in most of the countries, Standard English can be an asset to get a good job. So, professionals like doctors, university teachers, journalists, civil servants who have specific human agency use the Standard spoken English, and the powerless people may use a non-standard variety of spoken English.

Agency uses language to emphasise common sense-assumptions (Torres, 2013) according to which people interact linguistically. For example, the conventional conversation between a teacher and a student expresses common-sense assumptions which behave like authority and hierarchy as natural- the teacher uses power to decide about the students' performance. Such assumptions are ideologies (Thompson, 1984) which are closely linked to power, and they legitimise the existing social relations and differences of power. Ideology mainly exercises power through consent.

Language can be responsible for reproducing social inequality and discrimination in society. For example, some expressions of language may have higher value than others in a way that is associated with the people who are considered having more value including social prestige than others. Similarly, the ideas expressed by some people through language are more worthy than others. Hymes (1973) emphasises on how language becomes a cause for social inequality and discrimination. He stresses the coercive and power-laden forces through which some languages have the power to govern others. For example, the one language policy (Nepali as the national language) of the government during the Panchayat period dominated the languages of minority groups (Rai et al., 2011). Likewise, the example of North American Indians' pressure to give up speaking their languages and follow English can illustrate this view because the Indians are less valued and their social performances and ideas expressed through their languages are less valued (Duranti, 2004). In a similar vein, Bourdieu (1977) states that language as a symbolic capital creates inequality judging that some forms of language are highly valued than others. He supports his views with the example of Western European contexts where the people with the capacity to speak the standard dialect of their national language are more likely to get a better-paying job than those who are unable to speak it. Similarly, Giri (2010) argued that the linguistic superiority of the English language as cultural/symbolic capital has become a power for elites and the middle class with higher social status to achieve a good position in Nepal compared to others.

People's knowledge and beliefs, social relationships, and social identities develop their agency to make them more powerful than others, and in discourse (in discourse, hidden discourse, and behind discourse) the powerful participants can exercise over the contributions of powerless participants (Foucault, 1980). For example, in the conversation between a doctor and a patient, the doctor may exercise power over the patient. Likewise, a priest can exercise power over the ordinary people in their religious conversation. In these examples, the doctor's and the priest's agency have the right to control encounters through

language.

Language ideologies about men and women are unfair which ignores the contribution of women and considers women's language as powerless language. For example, several words to refer to the important positions like headmaster, chairman and policeman are in favour of males who have underestimated the women agency. The male agency uses the power of language to dominate women in various social lives. For example, in the Tonga community in the South Pacific, language gives power to males compared to females. Pacific women do not get the titles like orators who represent chiefs and families (Duranti, 2004), so the word orator is for male because male agency holds the power and uses language to support them. Several semantic structures of English devalue women, and make them invisible, among other things. Words like whore and bitch ridicule women sexually. Similarly, Brown et al. (1987) argue that women's language style is perceived as politer which is powerless, compared to the powerful language of men. Gyamera (2019) reported that in Ghanaian societies, the traditional political portfolios such as chiefs, lineage heads, counsellors, and diplomats that are strictly related to communicative functions are male dominated. The above examples and arguments show that language constructs gender and power is achieved through language.

Conclusion

Language serves several social functions according to social practice and process. Many philosophers and linguists state that language performs various roles apart from communication. For Example, Gramsci claims that the hegemony of a particular language such as English may impose power in global politics and economy. Moreover, language helps to construct social reality. Similarly, agency controls others, and each agency can use the power of language to impose his/her ideas and knowledge over others. However, agency can be context-specific which may have an impact on all social actions. Various social institutions including language can empower a person's agency.

Language has the power to govern truth because the truth is the product of language games. Similarly, an agency can use the power of language to rule others. Agency develops the capacity to control the power of language. In many situations, the power of language can contribute to social inequality and discrimination. Language, especially the social dialects divide the people into different social groups as the dialect for the high-class people can be different from the dialects of low-class people. Likewise, language discriminates against gender roles. For example, the language for males is different from the females who are considered powerless. Agencies can play with the power of language to use it in favour of them, not for ordinary people. Similarly, the agency uses language to underline the common-sense assumption. Moreover, language matters a prestige and empowerment which can influence the language policy and planning. For example, the hegemony of the English language has influence in various fields including the medium of instruction in schools and universities. Finally, language and agency are interrelated, and agency

imposes power through language to control others in society.

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