

Language as an Index of Identity, Power, Solidarity and Sentiment in the Multicultural Community of Wollo

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Abstract

Language serves different functions in different societies. The target group in this study uses their language for different purposes. This study is aimed at investigating the functions of the in-group code of the speech group, the most obvious characteristic feature of which is maintaining their religious and linguistic identity and making use of the language as an expression of power in their social structure. Language serves instrumental, symbolic, cognitive, sentimental, and other functions in the target community. In its instrumental function, language controls access to power, opportunity and material resources. Language carries an enormous political, social and economic power. In its symbolic function, language indexes identity. In terms of the cognitive dimension, language serves to influence the belief and thought systems of the speakers. The sentimental function of the code is maintained as a result of sanctity being attached with their religion. The speech code of the target community makes use of their language as an expression of identity. They reconstructed their religious and linguistic identity in the code they speak. By so doing they maintained Ethiopic or Amhara Identity. They indigenize or localize their religion, Islam, so that they wouldn't be considered foreign in their own homeland. They also revealed Islamic identity in the speech code. The other significant feature of the speech code is its use as an expression of power. Amharic gained social and political power. Arabic gained sanctity power. By modifying Amharic and using some elements of Arabic lexical and grammatical repertoire, the community empowered Amharic, the local language. They also modified the social structure that helps to accommodate ideological power.

Keywords: Language as index; Identity; Power; Solidarity; Sentiment

Introduction

Diversity is the norm in Ethiopia. Several ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity of different kinds co-exist for generations. There are many languages spoken in the country. While the major religions are orthodox Christianity, Islam and Protestant, there are also other religions that have significant number of followers. Different cultures are exhibited through the ways of dressing, living, eating and different social practice of their day to day activities. Different as they are, they do not live separately. Extensive contact mixed them to a great extent that they have developed sense of belongingness to each other. There is a lot of cultural and linguistic diffusion among the diverse groups as a result of contact. The majority of the people belong to Christianity and Islam in religion and Oromo and Amhara in language-based ethnic group. Historical records witness that these people show peaceful co-existence in contrast to what is happening in many parts of the world. Wollo is one of the mostly known areas of the country in this regard.

Topographically, Wollo is bounded by Tigray in the North, Gojjam in the West, Shoa in the South and Afar in the East. The capital city, Dessie, is 400 km away from Addis Ababa. Wollo is one of the very few places in the world where Muslims and Christians co-exist peacefully. The community has a unique history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence that was revealed through their language. This community consists of a large number of Muslims and Christians. Wollo is where a large number of both Muslims and Christians have lived peacefully for

a longer period of time. Popular opinion has it that many of the people are not strong in their religion and that they easily shift between orthodox Christianity and Islam. It is the place where nobody is surprised to find an Ahmed priest and a Gebre Shekh or Imam (Islamic honorific title). It is also very common to have somebody from the family change his/her religion. It is also not so much amazing to see couples who are from different religions, i.e. the husband is a Muslim and the wife is a Christian or vice versa. These and many more distinctive ways of life of this community prove the fact that religious difference cannot prevent people from loving each other limitlessly to the edge.

The norms and rules of conduct in this society are designed by both religions. The customs are shared. Each custom originated from either religion, but both follow it probably with a different label. For example, a 'Christina Lig' (God child) is a concept of the Christian society, and this concept is adopted by the Muslims by a label known as 'Yayn Lig' (Eye's Child). There is a thick historical record that this community exhibits a harmonious and peaceful coexistence and an intense sense of belongingness. The Wollo community is far more than mixed. There is a strong blood tie as there is intermarriage among Muslims and Christians. There is also cultural diffusion and strong sense of togetherness that has been held for generations. Lots of significant cultural and historical contexts tie the Muslim-Christian Community of Wollo (ASMCW) [1].

Language carries the history, the culture, the tradition and the very life of people. Language cannot be conceived without people or vice versa. The people and its language are inseparable. To know one means to know the other. Studying the linguistic and cultural features help to

understand what underlies in the belief and value systems of people. Studying the language of a particular society gives the whole picture as to who they are, and how and why they use their language. In the way the ASMCW uses their language, both speech and written, their effort to indigenize Islam perhaps by Arabizing their local language Amharic is portrayed. This situation triggered the researcher to explore how, and why this community use their language in the way they do. More specifically, this study is aimed at investigating the functions of the in-group code of the ASMCW the most obvious characteristic feature of which is maintaining their religious and linguistic identity and making use of the language as an expression of power in their social structure.

Functions of language

In many cultures, we often find micro culture and macroculture. Microculture is a collectivity with conscious identity and grouping coexisting within a larger culture and Macroculture is the larger culture [2]. In Wollo, the Amhara culture as an ethnic identity is shared by both Muslims and Christians as a macro culture. The Muslims of this area have another microculture, Islam, their religion that is considered foreign to the Amhara. The Wollo Muslims modified Amharic to incorporate their religious identity. This modified language serves to express power in the social structure.

Language assumes a social group who uses it as a means of communication (Greenberg, 1971:274). Speech communities create and establish their own speaking codes or norms. The code incorporates different means including the linguistic varieties and sub-codes that are unique to them, conventional speech acts and different genres available to the members of that group [3]. The creation of any speech code is justified to serve certain functions in the group.

According to Abraham (1990:71), language mainly has three functions known as instrumental, symbolic and cognitive in its instrumentality function, language controls access to power, opportunity and material resources. Language carries an enormous political, social and economic power. In its symbolic function, language decides identity. In terms of the cognitive dimension, language serves to influence the belief and thought systems of the speaker.

Besides these, the argument the researcher would like to develop in this article is that language indexes many more things as well. Mainly, in the speech code of the target speech group, identity and power are embedded in the communication system of the target community. As an attempt to preserve and sustain these elements, language as an expression of identity and power, the Muslim Amharic speakers have created an in-group code that appears as a variety of Amharic. The following statements are committed to explaining how language indexes power and identity in the ASMCW.

Language as an expression of identity

Every society has social rules and concepts of group membership. There are various intricate connections between ethnic identity and language. Language is often used as a defining characteristic of ethnic identity in many societies including Ethiopia. Amhara Muslims, especially of Wollo, have identity dilemma. The dilemma partly emanates from the assumption or myth that defines ethnic identity. There is a myth that relates Amhara to Christianity and Oromo to Islam. When one is Muslim from Wollo, many automatically conclude that s/he is Oromo and when he/she is Christian, they conclude that he/she is Amhara. This supposition does not create any problem for

those who are Oromo Muslims of Wollo. However, this creates a huge identity crisis for those who are Amhara Muslims of Wollo by leaving them with no ethnic group to hold on to. This claim shows that the target groups are not welcomed by both the Oromo and Amhara of the area. This is because, on the one hand, as they are claiming to be native Amharas and do not speak Oromifa, they are not accepted as Oromo of Wollo but as Amharic Speaking Muslim Community of Wollo. On the other hand, the 'native Amharas' or the Christian Amhara consider the Wollo Muslim Amharas as alien and question their origin.

Hence, Amharic is considered to be the language of Christians to the extent that the word 'Amhara' itself represents Christians. In Wollo, one finds it common to ask or be asked 'Are you Muslim or Amhara?' to mean 'Are you Muslim or Christian?' If it is not for the local people who knew exactly what it means, a Muslim Amhara person who is equally both Amhara in ethnic group and Muslim in religion would find it difficult to choose between his/her two important identities by saying 'I am Amhara,' or 'I am Muslim.' For this person, affirmation of one means denial of the other. The native people, however, know that it clearly asks for the religion and not for the ethnic identity. Thus, there is a tendency by both Muslims and Christians to link Christianity to Amharic and Islam to Arabic. This strengthens the assumption that Christian Amharas are more Amharas than Muslim Amharas. In other words, this idea advocates and itself is a reflection of the hypothesis that the Christians of this area are native Amhara and the Muslims are alien, foreign and stranger.

These assumptions prove the fact that the identity of this group is being doubted. The speech group felt that they need reaffirmation of their characteristic. Language is a feasible option in the identity reconstruction process. Language has its own dimension in that we can symbolize in a coded way all the other concepts which we use to define ourselves and our society [4]. Language offers a very overt symbolization of us and of our universe, not only in the various grammars, lexicons and prosodies we can create for various domains of that universe, but also through the social marking which each occasion of use carries. Language is not only itself the focal centre of our acts of identity; it also consists of symbols. These symbols (that are represented by words) are the means by which we define ourselves and others [4,5]. Consequently, the target communities modified Amharic and create their speech code to identify themselves as Amhara, and Muslim of Wollo. By modification, it means that the speech group have introduced lexical, structural and semantic variation, extension and deviation on Amharic to make the language index something else other than its use as a means of communication. Their ethnic and religious identities are reflected in their code. In order for the code to adequately serve this function, the community modified it in such a way that it shows the reconstructed identity; it reveals local (Ethiopic/ Amhara) origin; it shows how Islam is indigenized and Islamic identity mirrored.

Identity reconstructed: Arabic is foreign and remote to Amhara and so is Amharic to Islam. The Amharas of Wollo are sandwiched between these two cultures. In other words, on the one hand, Amharic is inaccessible to Islam partly because Islam does not lend itself to be expressed through any other language than Arabic, and partly because Amharic is insufficient to explain Islamic culture. On the other hand, Amharic is very much related to Christianity that Muslims need some kind of adjustment to make before they use it to properly express their culture whose certain portion is Islam. These two far-off cultures are the identities of the Amhara Muslim Community of Wollo. At times, they clash as they advocate or are oriented by different systems. Some kind

of adjustment is mandatory to reconcile so that the two cultures co-exist: Amhara as Christianized culture and Islam as Arabized culture.

In response to this need, the identity of Amhara Muslims undergoes reconstruction. The reconstruction diffuses both cultures and comes up with a new culture. This culture reveals itself in the language of the community. This variety of Amharic has gained power over the other varieties of Amharic such as the Wollo dialect for the ASMCW as the language is detached from Islam. This happens obviously because the modified variety is so close to Islam than the others. The power comes from the religion of the target community. The speech code of the ASMCW reflects the reconstructed identity of the group. The religious and ethnic identities co-exist and explicitly reveal themselves in the language use of the community. The modified Amharic is utilized by the group as an expression of identity as it incorporates the religious elements of the group. Moreover, this code emerges as a variety of Amharic. It being Amharic, it affirms their national identity when used in the religious services. It being merged with Arabic, it appeals to their religious sentimental values.

Ethiopic/Amhara identity revealed: Amharic accessed Christianity first and was used to serve an instrumental function in the church, next, of course, to Ge'ez. The fact that Christianity enjoyed political and spiritual predominance that allowed the extensive use of Amharic around church, elites and the privileged status gave it a way to mold the culture according to it. Furthermore, the preexisting state employed the use of Christian culture to achieve national integrity or state nationalism. This is also strengthened by the myth that claims 'Ethiopia is an Island of Christianity.' The Amhara culture is, therefore, brushed with Christianity that happens to contribute to the identity dilemma of Muslims. Besides, traditional stigma associates Muslim Ethiopians with foreign aggression making them stranger and foreign community, minor, submerger and submissive there by labeling them as 'Muslims residing in Ethiopia.'

In response to the need to reaffirm the fact that the Muslims residing in Ethiopia are Ethiopians, they use their local languages, Amharic in the case of ASMCW to explain their other culture, Islam. However, they are not in a position to use Amharic without some kind of linguistic modification so that it tells their religious identity too and so that it is empowered to serve the purpose of explaining sacred or religious concepts. If to be a native Amhara means speaking Amharic that is used by the elite Christian society, then the Muslim Amharas' claim as a native Amhara would still be under inspection. This problem gave rise for another solution the ASMCW came up with, i.e. indigenizing Islam and giving it a local flavor.

Islam indigenized: Arabization is the major technique implemented to Islamize many countries including Sudan. Islam was not introduced nor expanded in Ethiopia in such a way. Arabic speaking immigrants have brought Arabic and Islam to Africa since the seventh century onwards [6]. The local Muslim scholars, who have contributed much to the Islamization of the Ethiopian society, employed the technique of Arabizing of the local languages to facilitate the extension of the faith. The Wollo Muslims tried to indigenise Islam Alula Pankhurst [7], as an expansion of the endeavour to reclaim their identity. The indigenization process took different linguistic and non-linguistic cultural forms.

Linguistically, modifications such as code-switching, code-mixing, extensive loan words from contact with Arabic and Oromifa languages, diglossia, and others have been employed to accommodate Amharic to explain Islam. There are Arabic words, expressions, verses, sayings and

quotes that have to be said in Arabic language only where translation is not an option. The fact that they have to be said does not weigh any more than the fact that they have to be said in Arabic language only. Such being the case, the target group's effort to use Amharic to explain their religion-Islam-depicts their urge to maintain and incorporate their religious and linguistic identity in their code thereby indigenizing Islam.

One significant effort in this regard is the Wollo Muslim scholars' Ajemi manuscripts, Amharic verse written in Arabic Script that could best serve as an example of this endeavour. Ajami is an original form of Islamic poetry recited in Amharic but written in Arabic script. The poetry is referred to as 'Ajami'. 'Ajami' is the performance of Wollo Muslim to give Islam a local flavour. 'Ajami' has a derogatory meaning that refers to foreign or non-Arab. This stems from the assumption of Arabs about the superiority of the Arabic language in which the Qur'an was revealed which also led to the doctrine that the Qur'an is untranslatable. Islamic poetry written in Amharic with Arabic script demonstrates how the Wollo Muslims try to accommodate Amharic local concepts to the explanation and interpretation of Islam.

Islamic identity revealed: If it was not for the need to reveal the Islamic identity of the group, the original Amharic did not have to be modified. In Ajemi manuscripts, the language is vernacular but the script is Arabic. The justification for the Muslim scholars' use of the language in such a way is to distinguish themselves from the Christian culture and because some Muslims and Christians considered Amharic as the language of Christians and Arabic as that of Muslims [8-10]. Hence, Muslim Amhara scholars tend to use the Arabic scripts with Amharic to narrate anything that has to do with Islam. From the perspective of communication, this would help them to understand religious concepts. The audience would also be interested to hear the religious ideas in their mother tongue as this would uplift the position of their language. However, the major purpose is that the ASMCW want to reveal their religious identity by using Arabic script in Amharic language. Extensive loanwords, code-mixing and code-switching are also used by the target group to mirror their Islamic identity.

Naming is another case in point: For all the Wollo Muslim Amhara Community knows, they are Amhara. So, they name their children by Amharic names. They also identify themselves as Muslims, and so, they name their children by Arabic names too. Amharic and Arabic names are available for the community. In Ethiopia, many identify a person who is from Wollo just from his/her name because it is mixed in Arabic and Amharic names. For example, such names as Ahmed Kebede, and Alemesh Hassen are very common. Such names could tell that the individual is from Wollo and he is either a Muslim or a Christian. Amharic names like Kassa, Belete, Emawaysh are also named after the experience, feelings and emotions of the parents. Consequently, pure Amharic names were very common in the traditional Muslim community of Wollo. A person named Haylu Tefera, Amharic only, could be a Muslim. Recently, however, this tradition is being challenged by the awareness of the Islamic identity of the community and the confusion of the people about how to be Amhara and Muslim at the same time.

Nowadays, therefore, the people of this community are changing their naming tradition. They are inclined to use Arabic names only as they observe many of the 'informed' Muslims change their Amharic names to Arabic. The immediate question will be why? It is because a 'Kebede' does not feel as Muslim as a 'Muhammad'. Others do not take an 'Alem' (the name of my sister about whom I myself was several

times asked if she was a Muslim) as obvious Muslim as a 'Seada'. Such individuals would find a hard time to be accepted and identified as Muslims before they confirm that they are. On the contrary, those whose names happen to be Arabic are free of this trouble since the name itself serves as a label of their Islamic identity.

Language as an expression of power

Power is not something that persons pull out and use it on others. Real power comes in when the people on whom the power is being acted on must believe in it [11]. There are many sources of power [12]. Where does the influential personalities' power and authority come from, and how do they display their power in language? These are central questions in analysis of power relationship as displayed in language use within a community (Ibid). According to [11], any analysis exploring issues of power must be based on a primary analysis of the community's values and ideologies.

Kiesling [11], distinguished seven types of power: physical, economic, knowledge, structural, nurturing, demeanour and ideological. Of these all, ideological power is the most significant one because it shapes the world outlook and thinking as a way of naturalizing a community's behaviour.

Language is used both as a passive means of exercising power and an active player of it. It plays a passive role as a medium of turning the physical coercion in to influence whereas it plays an active role when the words, expressions or sayings themselves reflect the power of the speaker to tell, excite, insult, trigger, motivate, hurt, and create any other feelings. Language can emotionally affect us as powerfully as actions as or even more powerfully than physical measures. This exhibits the power of language. The power, however, is not embedded on the words but on the speaker. This is the role of language as an expression of power.

Ideological power gained

In the primitive society, source of power was physical coercion. Because humans were not in a position to exploit logic, the most physically fit was justified to rule the rest. This could be why women were physically coerced by the power of men. Likewise, those who are physically able to manipulate others have long been powerful over others. Those who have power exercise it by coercing or through consent of others who do not have power.

In ideology driven power, since the people agree that the ideology is a favoured one, the powerful group uses it as a means of dominating others and exercising power over the others [13]. Islamic teachings give due emphasis to the significance of Arabic knowledge to understand Islam. Consequently, it is only natural for non-Arab Muslims to want to learn Arabic. Moreover, some sayings are said to have rewards in the sight of Allah when said in Arabic than otherwise. For example, it is possible for one to offer greetings with any expression, but if s/he does it by saying 'Aselamualeykum warahmetulahi wabarakathu' (May Allah's peace, mercy and blessings be upon you), s/he will get 30 rewards. To add but one more example, if the Holy Qur'an is recited (read) in Arabic, every word will have reward (sawab), but if it is read in a translated form, it would not have as much reward as the original language in which the Qur'an was revealed.

These teachings and many more affirm for the Muslims the prestigious position of Arabic to any other living language. Any

common religious Muslim fellow would not hesitate to trade his/her language for Arabic. It is considered by Muslims as a heavenly language. More weight is given to Arabic, most importantly, because the Holy Qur'an, the last testament of Allah, the last 'kelam' (word, saying, message to mankind) was revealed in this language. Today, Arabic is the most powerful language for Muslims than any other language, even English, the most widely spoken language throughout the world, for that matter.

The power and superior position that Arabic enjoys resulted from its attachment to the religion Islam. Here, it is clear to observe the fact that Arabic detached from Islam does not have such power on non-native speakers, for example. Furthermore, since the language is highly considered for someone to be a Muslim, the message presented in it is also considered as much holy as the religion itself. The holiness that is attached to the religion and the language through which the religion is revealed might not exist among non-Muslims because neither the religion nor the language has such value for them. Arabic, in turn, gives power to those who speak it. More respect, attention, and interest is shown to those who use some Arabic expressions when preaching, conducting religious ceremony and doing any social activity for the target Muslim community. The same message when said in Arabic has more power and chance of being accepted or taken seriously or given weight by the listener than otherwise. The message (religious) has more power when said in Arabic-mixed language than in any local language.

Arabic is used in a diglossic relationship with vernacular languages of Ethiopia [6]. The Wollo Muslims shift from Amharic proper to mixing Arabic and Amharic since they feel that religious themes lose their values when discussed in Amharic [14]. The Arabic expressions have a very deep spiritual impact on the Muslim believers of that area. This use of language "... no doubt creates the aura of reverence and ecstasy within the inner feeling of the Moslem population" (Ibid). To this effect, expressions that deal with God, Prophet Mohammed, prayers, worship and religious concepts are expressed in Arabic than any Amharic equivalent. By using the modified variety, the speakers gain ideological power and they exercise it to manipulate those who believe in the ideology.

Amharic or the local language empowered

The in-group language use of the community involves Arabic as a reinforcer of power in their social construction. The speech code gained power over the other varieties of Amharic (Perhaps the Addis Ababa dialect) or the Wollo Dialect as the latter is detached from the ideology that the power is originated. This so happens obviously because the variety is so close to Islam than Amharic. The power of the code is gained from the religion of the target community. The code is empowered as it is modified by loan-words, code-switching, code mixing and other linguistic phenomena in order for the language to be able to explain religious concepts that are sacred. This makes it appear in a diglossic situation to Amharic. This means that the modified Amharic is the high variety that is entitled to serve the purpose of prestigious religious services and Amharic is the low variety to serve the day to day communication transactions.

Social structure modified

Communication and social structure are interrelated. Social categorization is a significant part of social system and language plays central role as it is used to mark them [15]. The mark determines the power structure of the categories. The communication pattern and

social structure are interrelated. Language plays direct and indirect control forms of influencing people such as threats, curses, teasing, and gossip [15].

The social structure of the ASMCW is modified in line with the macro culture of Amhara society and the micro culture of the Arab society imported through Islam. Social status marks are, for example, Shekh, Haji, Imam, Muazin came from the latter source. Honorific terms such as ('erswo') is used to express respect in both the ASMCW and the Amhara society in the bigger culture. Such honorific terms are used for respected personalities that hold social power that esteemed from their age, political, social, economic, educational (religious or secular) status. The social structure of the ASMCW that determine power relationship of the speakers is, therefore, categorized based on Amhara and Islam cultures. Religiously figured personalities are entitled to power that the ordinary members are not. They are assumed to be closer to God in some way than others. These individuals use their power that they gain through the ideology. The followers gave their consent to be manipulated. The powerful personalities exercise their power through the in-group code.

Conclusions

The modification of the language is justified by the functions it serves for the speech group. Language indexes other functions. People's selection of one code over the other for a certain situation is not random. The social meanings of language that the speech group deviate for are to express their identity, power, tolerance, solidarity and other attributes.

Identity, power, tolerance and solidarity are embedded in the communication system of the target community. As an attempt to preserve and sustain these elements, language as an expression of identity, power, tolerance and solidarity, the Muslim Amharic speakers have formed a sociolinguistic solution as the problem itself is strongly related to the language they speak. The solution is the formation of an in-group code, a modified variety of Amharic. They have customized the language as an expression of their values-religion and ethnicity.

The identity of Amhara Muslims undergoes reconstruction. The reconstruction diffuses both Amhara and Islamic cultures and comes up with a new culture. This new culture reveals itself in the language of the community, which is a modified variety of Amharic. This variety of Amharic has gained power over the standard Amharic among the Amhara Muslim Community of Wollo as the regular Amharic is detached from Islam. This happens, obviously, because the modified variety is so close to Islam than the regular one. The power comes from the religion of the target community. Since the IGC is more close to Arabic by way of borrowed words and structures, it has more power for the speech group than the Amharic variety spoken around. To this end, Wollo Muslims made every effort to make sure that their linguistic identity could also incorporate their religious identity.

The community owns and practices the discourse of solidarity. There are many social practices that exhibit how the community cultured and make tolerance a rule of communication. In their language use, tolerance is an important discourse that has been valued by the people. The in-group code is used as an expression of tolerance and solidarity. They use it to seek a common ground, approval and sympathy. Their language use reveals how they express, maintain and legitimize tolerance and solidarity as a rule of communication. In the culture-specific politeness strategies employed by the speech group, power structure is revealed that show how they maintain the communication system to express their values.

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