

Who Resides Behind the Words? Exploring and Understanding the Language Experience of the Non-English-Speaking Immigrant

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ABSTRACT

Issues of cultural diversity, race, and ethnicity have been profusely addressed in contemporary social work literature. However, the dimension of language experience in the recent immigrant has received minimal attention, and social service workers often overlook the importance of the client's native language in practice. Challenges facing the treatment of immigrants include language barrier and the immigrant's worldview, factors that need to be identified to discover the person within the client. Using the author's own experience and accounts from other immigrants, this article explores the non-English-speaking new immigrant's language subjective experience and its unique implications for self-evaluations. Honest curiosity on the part of the worker is emphasized.

Language is key in a person's presentation of self. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, convey complex messages, show knowledge, and more. Language has been the focus of study for many disciplines, including linguistics, literature, psychology, sociology, and others. It has also been studied from a multiplicity of philosophical perspectives. Most agree that language is our greatest "mediator," the link that allows us to relate and understand each other. It can be defined as a powerful tool, a system of conceptual symbols that not only allows us to communicate but also provides the individual with a significant frame of reference and a relational context that sustain identification.

As an immigrant to this country, it has been the author's experience—a shared experience with many others in the same situation—that familiarity with the official language, that immensely valuable and essential tool of communication,

has been a determining factor in the process of acculturation. On the contrary, lack of familiarity with the official language is a silent source of stress, immobility, depression, and feelings of inadequacy as well as low self-esteem. Even though there have been studies on the role of language in the individual's life across various social sciences and disciplines including social work, there is a need to understand what the new immigrant experiences when unable to communicate fluently with others because of a language difference. The intention of this article is to explore the new immigrant's language subjective experience and its unique implications for self-evaluation. By examining the author's own experience, the article aims to enhance the social worker practitioner's understanding and mindful practice with the non-English-speaking immigrant client.

What happens when the symbols we use to communicate with others are different from those that people in our

surroundings use? What are the thoughts, feelings, and self-evaluations of those individuals who find themselves unable to communicate as they used to? They have spent most of their lives sharing a culture with their counterparts that has delineated the way in which they understand and master the world around them, a world that they have symbolically defined by words specific to a language. Sometimes, representatives of these groups are called “immigrants.”

Immigrants, as representatives of the human race with strong tendencies to socialize and the “instinct” to do it by the verbal articulation of meaningful sounds originally acquired in an other-than-English language, frequently face the need to interact in other-than-family situations. These situations can vary from schools to medical offices, social agencies, communities, jobs, and the like, but the question newcomers often ask is the same, “Do

you speak my language?” What a sense of relief if the other person does! Feelings of security, mastery, and self-confidence are expressed in that particular moment. On the contrary, if the other person does not speak the same language, a sense of incompetence invades the newcomer, and this is a feeling that stays with new immigrants and gets reactivated every time they face a similar situation. This is the case for most nonnative English-speaking new immigrants regardless of their socioeconomic status and level of education.

Literature Review

The importance of language in all aspects of the individual’s life has been recognized by many disciplines. Psychology, for example, has been a pioneer science in the study of language. Starting with Freud (1915), who identified verbal communication as the essential tool in the treatment of neurosis and other mental problems, the creation of the “talking therapy” method in psychotherapy revolutionized the field of mental health and influenced other disciplines as well. As early as 1915, Freud recognized that second language proficiency is critical in the psychological life of the individual; he believed that linguistic variables such as mother tongue and second language were crucial in the clinician–client relationship (Freud, 1915).

During the late 1970s, Marcos and colleagues posited the notion of “language barrier” to account for the “detachment effect,” a phenomenon primarily seen in subordinate

bilinguals (persons who acquired the languages in two different cultural contexts). This detachment effect has been noticed in psychotherapeutic situations where feelings and events experienced in the mother tongue are not made available for exploration when psychotherapy is conducted in the second language (Marcos, Ureyo, & Kesselman, 1973). To investigate this assumption, Rozensky and Gómez (1983) noted that bilingual patients in psychotherapy

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conducted in their second language often feel split from both affective experiences and developmental issues that occur prior to their second language acquisition. This is particularly evident in the manifestation of feelings as opposed to more concrete words, (e.g., table, dog) where there is a direct association between the English word and its equivalent in the other language. In contrast, words that represent feelings and experiences occurred in the mother

tongue (e.g., love, anguish) carry affective connotations that are difficult to convey in a language that seems superficial because of its recent acquisition.

Within the field of psycholinguistics, there has been extensive research attempting to investigate the role of language in cognition and emotion. Clinical psychologist and professor Rafael A. Javier, for example, dedicated his career to the ongoing investigation and careful analysis of bilingual clients in psychotherapy. Javier (1989) illustrated how linguistic shifting may further reinforce defenses such as intellectualization, splitting, and isolation of affect. He portrayed language as being intimately connected with most aspects of human development. “Because of this pervasive quality,” he postulated, “language is incorporated as part of the individual’s coping mechanism, and at times it may even serve a definite defensive role” (Javier, 1989 p. 87). Although pertaining only to those individuals who are bilingual, this observation is very important and enlightening for professionals working as mental health providers in communities where an increasing number of individuals acquire a second language as a result of immigration.

Whether use of the bilingual client’s second language in psychotherapeutic situations influences the effectiveness or course of the treatment remains unclear (Marcos & Alpert, 1976; Rozensky & Gómez, 1983). However, the “affect-communication difficulty” (Rozensky & Gómez, 1983) has been detected and documented extensively. Researchers believe that the second language remains

intellectualized and somewhat distant from a person's feelings; the first language, on the contrary, remains both the vehicle for the expression of feelings and the storage of cognitive experiences (memories) acquired in that language (Rozensky & Gómez, 1983). As Thass-Thenemann (1973) reported, the bilingual person's first language is involved in all emotional conflicts, whereas the foreign one is associated with rational learning, the intellectualized, thus conflict-free aspect of the individual's presentation of self (Thass-Thenemann, 1973), which might explain why bilingual people tend to use the second language in the workplace and the mother tongue at home.

The age of acquisition of the second language is also important, as the older the individual is when learning a foreign language, the more structured and defensive her or his speech is, and the more emotionally detached the person appears in the second language. There might be more than one way to express something in the mother tongue and only one in the learned language (Rozensky & Gómez, 1983). Instead of using a word or a phrase, the adult using a second language frequently needs to "explain" a concept by using a paragraph that consequently disperses the initial main point of the conversation.

A different scenario, the case of monolingual individuals under foreign-language psychiatric care, has also been studied (Oquendo, 1996; Vásquez & Javier, 1991). In these situations, not uncommon among immigrants, one of the most frequently presented problems is the use of translators, particularly those who are not effectively trained. Communication between individuals implies the transmission of verbal and nonverbal messages, including perceptions, ideas, feelings, and experiences. When this communication occurs between two individuals whose worlds differ in terms of culture, geographic location, and linguistic contexts, the verbal transmission needs to be bridged by an interpreter who, in many cases, cannot capture the two worlds but can function only as a linguistic liaison. Common errors include the minimization or maximization of symptoms, as well as the mere literal translation of a situation that may signify much more than the linguistic aspect. There may be a number of culturally related codes that pertain to the specific tradition or idiosyncrasy the person is part of (Vásquez & Javier, 1991). The use of interpreters or the bilingual clinician is often not enough. Instead, the bicultural evaluation and treatment is a more accurate approach to the monolingual psy-

chiatric patient (Oquendo, 1996).

Within the parameters of psychology and linguistics, research has been comprehensive in shedding light on understanding the bilingual person's differential linguistic structures and the monolingual person's experience in a situation where interpretation is needed for psychiatric diagnoses and treatment. It is crucial, then, to understand that language in the individual's life plays a central role and, to a great extent, structures the creation of his or her reality (Anderson, 1997; Gergen, 1994; González, 2002).

On a sociological level, there is an intimate connection of language with history, culture, socioeconomic, and other aspects of the human life. Language is the human vehicle to communicate perceptions. It also has transformational and regulatory power (Vygotsky, 1962). Javier wrote, "It is through language that

reality and other impressions become organized into units of systems, concepts and categories thus transforming the world of sense impressions into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings" (Javier, 1988, p. 88). As Vygotsky (1962) viewed it in his effort to understand the acquisition of language, "all speech originated for the primary purpose of interpersonal communication and all higher mental functions are internalized social relationships." Perhaps even more important, when persons are acquiring their native language immersed in a specific social context, they are also appropriating a cultural model that is going to tailor and, to some extent, define their personalities and perceptions of the world (Vygotsky, 1962).

"On a cultural level, language is the symbolic expression of community, encoding a group's values, its folkways and its history" (Hernández-Chávez, 1988, p. 45). Language learning is incorporated in the daily life of the infant. As children mature, their language abilities not only improve phonetically and grammatically but also evolve as they enter the society and interact with others. Language incorporates the transmission of information, meaning, and also culture. "Socially, it [language] is the most powerful means of interaction and communication and it is through language that an individual or a group seeks and attains participation in society" (Hernández-Chávez, 1988, p. 45).

Given this information, how can we understand the experience of those members of the always-growing population in this country called immigrants? According to some writers, the processes of "enculturalization" and "acculturalization"—said to parallel the second language

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acquisition process—although intertwined, differ from the language experience of the immigrant. Hispanic and Latin American immigrants, for example, often must cope not only with stressors associated with lower economic status but also with stress associated with the language and cultural demands of the host American society (Malgady & Zayas, 2001, p. 39). Russian immigrants frequently experience misunderstanding, unrealistic expectations, and difficulty with language in working with human service professionals (Sternberg, 2002). These might be unique problems for each community, yet the frustration, anger, and hurt caused are the same for both groups.

Contemporary authors who are immigrants themselves (Malgady & Zayas, 2001; Ruzzene, 1998; Sternberg, 2002) have emphasized the importance of the individual's language experience in contextualizing the non-English-speaking immigrant and his or her family in a particular social situation and geographic place. In Australia, for example, Ruzzene (1998) explored the implications of the linguistic complexities derived from the risk of "primary language erosion," which immigrants fear in themselves and their children if they do not consciously maintain and develop their first language at home. The loss of their first language could affect the degree of their connectedness with their ethnic community.

Ruzzene (1998) discussed the concept of "cross-lingual communication," a phenomenon that occurs when the hearer and the speaker do not have a language in common. In conversation, each may leave out details and employ long paragraphs to explain something that could be expressed in a primary language in a phrase. Ruzzene also discussed the "emotional underlay" of the conversation, a phenomenon observed when the conversation is being held in English, but the overall communication is perceived to be charged with Italian emotions, tones, and gestures (Ruzzene, 1998).

Sternberg (2002) emphasized the importance of the loss of language for the Russian immigrant, which takes place in addition to many other losses (of home and possessions, cultural idiosyncrasy, social status, and security). "Given the significance of social status in Russians' self-esteem and sense of identity," Sternberg stated, "losing their native language is also a fundamental change in self-concept and security" (p. 100). Many middle-aged Russian professionals initially saw no way to resume their careers, as they felt the requirements to do so were beyond their English language abilities. But the highly educated immigrants began to build on previous achievements, and a sense of optimism began to replace the pessimism they experienced initially (Sternberg, 2002, p. 104).

Discussion

Social workers often overlook the importance of clients' native language in practice. The social worker who is curi-

ous to capture the real self of a person—which resides behind the limits of a few learned words lacking the emotional content of the mother tongue—should be aware of the feelings of inadequacy newcomers and other immigrants often have in expressing themselves in a foreign language. Such inadequacy is expressed in the following excerpts from an informal conversation with immigrants of different backgrounds:

"I feel like a child trying to organize my speech around basic words," reported María. "I want to say something coherently that can take just a couple of words, and it takes me two or three sentences and twenty minutes to put it together," expressed Pier. "It is totally infantile! I felt unable to engage in a serious, adult-type of conversation!" remembered Dr. López. "I'd rather stay home, or go shopping for groceries to the supermarket where I don't need to ask for things I wish to buy. It takes only sign language to buy food," says Theresa.

Immigrants suddenly realize that, after being able to fluently symbolize their existence through a known language, they find themselves unable to relate to others eloquently. They regress to an earlier, preverbal stage of communication when they lacked the ability to manage the medium of language. They worry about how they are seen by others, whether they are perceived as children in their preverbal stage, without the figurative or symbolic language that makes them adults. Such thoughts and feelings are conflictual and are carried every time they must face the reality of the everyday life in a strange land that does not look or sound familiar. There is an inner sense of ambiguity between what they have gained and what they have lost in the process of acquiring a new language in a new culture where the foreign language prevails and is paramount for social interaction. Even when immigrants attain a desirable standard of fluency and confidence in the new language, there is often a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction that goes along with their conversations. These longings for eloquent and adult interactions, which include unfinished discourses and melancholy-provoking remembrances of what was well articulated in the past, start to erode their present and thus, often inadvertently, affect the emotional life of the nonnative-speaking immigrant.

Practitioners in many settings may find themselves providing services to immigrants. To understand the person behind the new language, the social worker needs to be aware of five ways in which the foreign tongue can conceal the true self: (1) emotional superficiality of the second language, (2) the significance of language as a cultural frame of reference, (3) the distancing effect of a foreign language, (4) social acceptance and the perception of others, and (5) self-evaluation and personalism.

Emotional Superficiality of the Second Language

Verbalization of feelings is an intellectual task for the non-native speaker; in the second language, the person remains intellectualized and distant from feelings. In a therapeutic situation, failure to recognize this can lead to inappropriate diagnosis or misunderstanding of certain spousal or family dynamics that can be some of the reasons for client's consultation. In a professional setting, in an effort to appear clear enough and free of grammatical errors, a client may try to convey messages that suggest eloquence but lack spontaneity. Since some information is readily accessible only via the language in which it was acquired, (Marcos et al., 1973) the person's affect or inner states may be constrained by having to speak in an unfamiliar language.

Once one is in contact with the feeling, to find the "right word" to describe it requires a cognitive effort that implies a vast and ready-to-use vocabulary that in a second language could result in either a minimization or a maximization of the feeling. During a Spanish-speaking, multifamily group meeting with wives and daughters of victims of the World Trade Center attack of 2001, for example, one of the members distinguished the advantage of telling her story in Spanish as opposed to English, and being heard in her native language rather than having an interpreter translating her story. "In my own language," she said, "I can speak my feelings and vividly remember how the experience was, I can dialogue and feel that there is a meeting of feelings with the other person, that I am not alone. This way it is like I am honoring my loved one." It may be particularly difficult for a person to express some feelings, yet when it is possible to express them in the mother tongue, as in the case of this woman, the process of intellectualization is obviated, there is no need for further explanation, and a sense of self-mastery is immediately developed. Sometimes the acquisition of a new language can provide a person with the "right expression" for a particular sentiment, and thus can be used as a coping mechanism to express emotionally loaded experiences. For example, one immigrant named Zulma expressed a preference to express anger in English, her second language. "Growing up in my country," she asserted, "at my parents' home, I was not allowed to express anger. I developed a tremendous sense of suppression of anger and patience. But here I felt freer—I felt freer because I redefined myself, so anger was more accessible to me." In this case, a second language served as a vehicle to become more self-regulated by finding ways to verbalize feeling that were once censored or restricted by external forces.

The Significance of Language as a Cultural Frame of Reference.

Some 30 years ago, those who promoted anthropologic linguistics (Ruzzene, 1998) proposed that cognitive behavior is influenced by the semantic structure of language, and that the individual's mind is shaped by the language that

person speaks. "People who speak different languages," they argued, "live in different worlds, not in the same world with different labels attached" (Scollon & Scollon, 1981, p. 37). Language is a functional tool for communication; it provides the symbols we need to interact with one another. However, from a subjective perspective, our language belongs to us both individually and collectively; it is an intrinsic part of the person and at the same time represents our affective connectedness with culture. "One is more oneself in one's mother tongue" (Skutnabb-Kangass, 1981, p.49). When we change languages, both our worldview and our identities get transformed. We need to become new selves to speak a language that does not come from our core self, a language that does not reflect our inner-connectedness with the culture it represents.

When asked about her experiences in expressing emotions in the second language, Zulma's immediate response was, "actually, it felt good! Because emotionally, I was unhappy in my own country at that point of my life, and being here was ... emotionally for me, better. I remade myself the way I wanted to be. It was fine for me to find a new language because I needed to be a new self." In this case, then, the learned language helped her as a medium of self-expression, but at the same time, differentiation and distancing her from her own culture.

A different example would be that of a nonnative speaker who is a newcomer seeking mental health services and being defined by a label (diagnosis) solely based on symptoms presented. Lacking the language used in the mainstream culture to communicate feelings in a way that makes sense to others, it is possible that symptoms become the only way for people to manifest suppressed reactions to discontent and distress when they are unable to articulate those feelings in a familiar, nonpathologic way. For example, feelings of discontent with the host society's cultural mandates, including gender and work expectations and emotional distress related to disruptions in personal relationships due to immigration, are often expressed through symptoms common to depression, (e.g., sadness, dissatisfaction with life, lack of motivation, isolation). In such cases, treatment of depression should take into account and integrate the biological and historical determinants as well as the interpersonal and cultural factors, including those directly associated with the impact of immigration and language experience. This should include the understanding of the nonnative language as a tool used by the immigrant person for change and transformation of self and how the individual negotiates between the private self and the public self emerging with the new language.

The Distancing Effect of a Foreign Language

In the space between what immigrants gain in acquiring a new self with a new language, and what they keep inside in their private self expressed in their language, there is a sense of ambiguity that gets trapped in untold stories.

Some of these stories are, for example, of uncertain interactions between individuals with unequal competence in the same language. The following example illustrates this. “Where I could not catch up,” remembered Zulma, “was when we got together with a group of friends, snobbish, intellectual, very intelligent people, who also enjoyed laughing a lot, making a lot of cynical jokes, talking fast, jumping with ideas. I could not catch up, I just had no idea of what they were talking about. I was the one who, supposedly, never had a sense of humor,” she added, “because I wasn’t catching on to jokes. Language was intertwined with, I think, cultural history that I didn’t have ... an association of language with cultural events or a way of seeing the world different from mine. I was left out many times, not getting it.” In this case she felt distant, alienated by the idiosyncrasies of a foreign language that echoed assumptions about her personality, level of education, and socialization skills.

Lack of familiarity with a second language can result in infantilized parents and parentified children who need to act as a “language brokers” for the parent whose language limitations restrict access to services. Or there may be grandparents who cannot communicate with grandchildren, or elementary school students who do not understand the teacher and make sense of those memories only years later while mastering the language and having flashbacks to early childhood years. Lack of language fluency can lead to families who need translators during informal gatherings such as holiday celebrations, or creative writers who struggle to find the right word, or frustrated public speakers who retreat to the silence of the private self. All remain untold stories, because there is no language that can tell them right, and there is no hearer that can appreciate them well, resulting in feelings of disconnection and distancing from both inner feelings and the language to express them.

Untold stories, in turn, create a sense of aloneness and disconnection, a diminished sense of worth and inability to act productively in the task of getting to know the others. They create a sense of loss that can be difficult to detect because of its ambiguous characteristics. As Pauline Boss (2000), daughter of immigrants and a family therapist and teacher, put it, “Ambiguous loss makes us feel incompetent. It erodes our sense of mastery and destroys our belief of the world as a fair, orderly and manageable place. The last and most difficult step in resolving any loss is to make sense of it. In the case of ambiguous loss, gaining meaning is even more difficult than in an ordinary loss, because the grief itself remains unresolved” (Boss, 2000, p. 107).

Social Acceptance and the Perception of Others

Popular signs that read “accent correction,” and commercials promoting “improvement in vocabulary” reflect how much society relies on language to determine the status of the person speaking. Although immigrants are not a

homogeneous group of poor and uneducated people, as often portrayed by the media, lack of proficiency in English immediately implies ignorance, limited education, and low socioeconomic status and class origin. For example, in an interview with a male immigrant who is debating whether or not to engage himself in a third language-blended relationship, Dan recalled the “weird faces my first wife used to make at my unintelligible comments.” Dan’s perception of his wife’s facial expression when his speech was not clear enough for her to understand him immediately triggered feelings of frustration. But with greater pain Dan remembered his second wife, referring to her “interpretations” of his utterances. This is the point at which the immigrant develops a great need to be clear. People look at nonnative speakers in a strange manner, a manner in which they have never been looked at before; they place their ears where their eyes were supposed to be, facing at them. Clarity of speech becomes an obsession; the need to be understood is paramount in the daily existence of the immigrant.

Self-Evaluation and Personalism

The limitations of an “artificial” language conceal the intellectually mature, eloquent, and self-confident self within the nonnative speaker. When the foreign language predominates in conversations, the person no longer communicates in the language that provides the comfort of a familiar frame of reference, and the relational context that sustains identification with the self in relation with the other becomes unnatural. The “defective” way in which immigrants use the mainstream language makes them different; consequently, in their effort to prevent confusion and misunderstandings and to avoid being reduced to categories of inferiority, they develop the need to manifest themselves in an effective manner. They prefer to personalize all verbal interactions to make sure they are coherent. Zulma, for example, emphasized, “it was a huge struggle to have to become clear through the total abstraction of words, and when I needed to talk to people on important issues, I wanted to see them! I thought that my intentions were not clear enough in the new language. Therefore, I would insist on seeing the person face to face.” For a second-language person, the nonpersonal contact is difficult. “After being able to do it over the phone,” Zulma stated, “people said, oh no, don’t talk to me over the phone, e-mail me, or write me. That was even more difficult!” She added, “To abstract it and to be understood through writing, not face to face, or even voice to voice, when at least the tone of the voice can make you clear, the music in your voice, or the phrasing, or the emphasis on certain words cannot be understood in writing, because it is even further abstract.” The effort to be clear through words, the need to be read clearly in coherent phrases, free of linguistic errors that can compromise discourses could turn simple things in life into agony, and self-evaluations into devaluating and distressing concepts.

Conclusions and Implications

Enhancing the social work practitioner's understanding of their immigrant client's personal experience in language will contribute to service provided by those interested in working with immigrants. Being mindful of language will add insight to social work practice, resulting in increased client satisfaction, and will prepare the profession for both the development of new programs that can benefit this continuously growing population and the creation of more sensitive policies that directly affect this clientele.

When working with the nonnative English-speaking immigrants, social workers need to be aware of the emotional impact of losing one's cultural and social context and of the language to express the discontent and distress resulting from such a loss. Practitioners also need to exercise some reflective thinking and examine their own assumptions about who their clients really are. In doing so, a different atmosphere is created. The relationship between client and worker becomes fluid, and an intense sense of connectedness develops.

Exploring and understanding the experience of the newcomer in having to articulate words that belong to an unfamiliar language can have empowering implications for both the client and the worker. On the one hand, this practice can facilitate the client's validation of his or her feelings as normal, typical reactions of a person who is being separated from a relational context that provided connectedness and affirmed who the person was. On the other hand, it can provide the worker with new lenses to see the person within the client and thus discover the uniqueness of the person's story. If the worker is invested in the practice of exploration and understanding of the immigrant client's foreign language experience, there is no need for that worker to be competent in the client's specific native tongue. Honest curiosity and sincere compassion are enough to discover who really resides behind the words.

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