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Language of Culinary Discourse and Cultural Preservation: A case study of first- and second-generation Punjabi Speakers

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Abstract



Food is an important aspect of any culture and so is language. The study hypothesizes that the language in which the culinary discourse takes place plays a role in preserving that language's (culinary) culture. In order to test this hypothesis, dinner-time conversations of six families have been recorded: three Punjabi-speaking families and three Urdu-Punjabi families (in which the second generation speaks Urdu). Moreover, three Punjabi speakers and three Urdu-Punjabi speakers are interviewed. The data thus collected are analyzed using van Dijk's (1993) framework of critical discourse analysis, which is presented as a conceptual triangle that connects society, discourse, and social cognition. The findings of the study reveal that the Urdu-speaking second generation of Punjabi speakers demonstrates either an unfamiliarity or a dislike for traditional Punjabi food. They are also found unaware of most of the culinary vocabulary, show a greater inclination towards fast food, and, therefore, exhibit a noticeable change in the culinary culture with the change in their language.

Keywords: Culinary discourse, Punjabi speakers, Urdu-Punjabi speakers, critical discourse analysis, cultural preservation

Introduction

The term *culture* has never been easy to define owing to its ubiquitous yet unique nature. Every human society possesses its own culture, which gets transmitted to the younger generations largely through imitation and instruction. According to Harris (1975), "A culture is the total socially acquired life-way or life-style of a group of people. It consists of the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society" (cited in Birukou et al., 2013, p. 3). In other words, it is the distinctive culture that gives a society its unique identity and, therefore, distinguishes one society from other societies which might otherwise be sharing the same geographical area. Moreover, the term *culture* is overly all-inclusive, encompassing all the facets of human life, including but not limited to religion, language, dress, food, music, festivals, and celebrations.

Although all of the above-mentioned constituents of culture are significant in one way or the other, language is particularly interesting due to its bidirectional nature, that is, it shapes the culture and is in turn shaped by it. Describing the importance of the relationship between language and culture, Brown (1994) maintained, "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 165). Emphasizing the inseparability of the two, Jiang (2000) used the metaphor of flesh and blood that language is flesh and culture is the blood and together they make a living organism, quoting his own words, "Without culture, language would be dead; without language, culture would have no shape" (p. 328). Imagine a situation where people belonging to one culture, while living in the same geographical space (without being forced by immigration or emigration conditions), start preferring and thereby using another language over their

own. Extending Jiang’s metaphor to such a circumstance, it can be said that a culture would start losing its shape.

As the world is becoming increasingly multilingual, learning another language does not imply abandoning one’s native language. However, in modern times, a large number of people have been observed abandoning their native languages in the favour of purportedly more prestigious languages. Their reasons for doing so might be very compelling but the effects can also be very far-reaching. Such language transition may have an effect on other aspects of culture too, such as dress, food, music, celebrations, etc., thus affecting the overall culture of the society. The present study intends to explore the effect of language transition (switching from one language to another) on people’s food choices. Food being an important aspect of culture has been studied extensively by sociologists and anthropologists, but much less by linguists. The present study attempts to highlight the impact, if any, of language transition on the culinary culture of their native language. For this purpose, the culinary discourse of the first-language speakers of Punjabi (first-generation Punjabi speakers) is compared with the similar discourse of the speakers who have switched from Punjabi to Urdu (second-generation Punjabi speakers). The implications of this language switching are sought for the culinary culture of the abandoned language, that is, Punjabi in the present case.

Research objectives

The study sets out to achieve the following research objectives:

- To find out the culinary preferences of the two groups of language users selected for this study.
- To determine the relationship between their culinary preferences and culture.

Research questions

The study seeks answers to the following research questions:

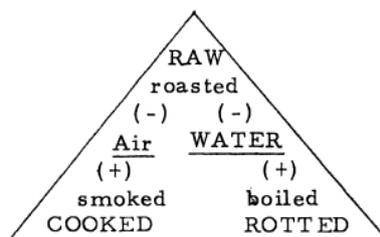
- What are the culinary preferences of the two groups of language users selected for this study?
- How do the culinary preferences of the two groups reflect their culture(s)?

Literature review

Montanari, a culinary historian’s book *Food is culture* (2004) is significant for highlighting the vital relationship between food and culture. The book is a historical exploration through the West European Middle Ages and the Renaissance of how ‘nature’ became culturally defined and food became a cultural product through the process of cooking. Three strong assertions that the author makes in the Introduction of this book are very thought-provoking as they highlight the step-wise process of transforming nature (raw material) into culture (cooked food): “Food is culture *when it is produced* ... Food becomes culture *when it is prepared* ... Food is culture *when it is eaten*” (p. xi, emphasis original).

Quite long before Montanari, in 1966, Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, demonstrated the transformative cultural power of cooking through a *culinary triangle* (figure 1) after observing and recording the eating habits and cooking routines of the tribes living in North and South America. He placed the three phases of food, viz. raw, cooked, and rotted, at the three corners of a triangle to mark the differences between them. According to him, cooked food was the product of cultural transformation due to processes, such as heating and the use of tools and utensils; whereas, rotted food was the result of natural transformation, that is, decomposition. The triangle also involved three types of cooking, viz. roasting, smoking, and boiling, which he equated with raw, cooked, and rotted food respectively.

Fig. 1: Culinary Triangle



(Source: Levi-Strauss, 1965/1966, p. 587)

Levi-Strauss mainly endeavoured to highlight the relationship between culture, food, and language; he tried to establish that it was through cultural processes that raw food was transformed

into cooked food and its value was further enhanced by the use of culinary vocabulary. With the help of this triangle, Levi-Strauss presented a model of the semantic field of cooking which he claimed to be of universal applicability to all cultures.

Lehrer (1972) evaluated Levi-Strauss's model by analyzing the semantic structure of the cooking vocabulary of the following languages:

- French, and Chinese (the cultures noted for their cuisine)
- Navajo, Jacalteco, Yoruba, and Amharic (not noted for their cuisine)
- English, German and Japanese

She demonstrated that Levi-Strauss's main error was to assume that it was possible to have an unbiased structure of cooking notions that will be effective for all the languages.

Food, like language, is highly prone to change. The culinary culture of the United States has been revolutionized since 1921 with the establishment of the first fast-food restaurant, White Castle. Later, McDonald's (established in 1940) and KFC (established in 1952) served to add more fuel to the fire. The overwhelming success of these fast food chains instigated Ritzer (1993; 2000) to use McDonaldization as a metaphor for some general features that characterize the present American society, which includes rationality, speed, and efficiency, perfectly embodied by McDonald's way of operating. The notions of speed, convenience, and standardization have replaced the culture of cooking food at home. The author repeatedly highlighted the fact that the onset of fast-food restaurants had not only impacted the food choices of contemporary Americans but also transformed the entire culture of American society. However, the effects of McDonaldization did not remain limited to the United States alone but spread to the rest of the world with serious consequences.

In the same vein, Popkin (1994) brought to light a nutrition transition among the populations in low-income countries which was toward unhealthy and disease-prone diets. The study pointed out the occurrence of major changes among the populations in Thailand, China (then a low-income country), and Brazil which included major shifts in the structure of diet and the distribution of body mass composition. The factors considered responsible for these changes were: reduced fertility rate and aging of the population, rapid growth in urbanization, the epidemiologic transition, and changes in the world economy. The study suggested that the observed nutrition changes among the populations in these countries reflected the tendency of an increasing number of people consuming the types of diets associated with several serious diseases.

Later, in a large-scale study, Drewnowski and Popkin (1997) compared economic and food availability data from 21 Asian nations during 1975-1994 with the data from the United States and posited a nutrition transition associated with increased consumption of fats and dietary sugars. According to this study, the two main factors responsible for this nutrition transition were: the greater accessibility of low-priced fats in the international economy and rapidly growing urbanization. The researchers inferred that there was "a global convergence toward a diet deriving a higher portion of energy from fat. That diet more closely approximated the diets of the United States and Western Europe than any traditional diet of Asia or Africa. Why this occurs is only open to conjecture" (p. 41).

A few years later, Lang and Caraher (2001) went a step ahead and propounded the theory of cooking skills transition, which they termed as *culinary transition*. They defined it as "the process in which whole cultures experience fundamental shifts in the pattern and kind of skills required to get food onto tables and down throats" (p. 2). The authors posited that, like eating, cooking was also in a state of quick transition. The change, according to them, was largely due to such influences as: "globalization, changing production and processing methods, the growth of ready processed/prepared food and the increase in take away/out meals" (p. 10). Referring to Ritzer (1993; and 2000), they highlighted that "the cooking skills transition is but another illustration of the McDonaldisation of culture or a facet of Americanisation" (p. 12).

Of all the above-mentioned studies, there is only one conducted from the perspective of linguistics and that is Lehrer's (1972), which is based on semantic analysis of the cooking vocabularies of various languages for the purpose of evaluating the culinary triangle, proposed by Levi-Strauss (1966). The rest of the studies conducted by sociologists, anthropologists and food and health sciences researchers have pointed out the following reasons for the nutrition/culinary transition under consideration:

- Availability of cheap fats in the global economy
- Popularity of ready-prepared/processed food (McDonaldization and Americanization)

- Shift in culinary skills due to technology, particularly the use of microwave.
- High cost of cooking food at home when equated with eating ready-to-eat foods.
- Rapid urbanization

However, what has not been pointed out as yet is Linguistic Transition, that is, a society's abandonment of their native language and switching to another, as a possible cause of nutrition/culinary transition.

Moreover, it was Ritzer (1993; 2000) alone who traced the shift in foodways to the overall shift in lifestyle or culture of American society. Otherwise, it can be safely said that very little attention has been paid to the implications of nutrition/culinary transition for the culture of the people undergoing such transitions. Particularly, there is a need to study the effects of nutrition/culinary transition on the cultures of low-income Asian and African countries, where English is not spoken as the mother tongue but an influence of McDonaldisation is still observable. The present study intends to explore the effects of language transition on culinary preferences and overall lifestyle of the people who undergo such a transition. For this purpose, the culinary discourse of Punjabi speakers will be compared with that of Urdu-Punjabi speakers, that is, the ones who have switched from Punjabi to Urdu. The study intends to seek the implications of such language transition for the transitions in food choices and ultimately the overall culture of the speakers.

Theoretical framework

Kramsch's (2002) notion of the relationship between culture and language serves as the theoretical framework for this study. According to her, cultural meaning is encoded in the linguistic sign. The use of a linguistic system affects thinking patterns, behaviours, discourses, and cultural worldviews. Moreover, culture is co-constructed by participants through interaction.

These ideas are very relevant to this study as it endorses a close link between language and culture and views the change in culinary preferences as an effect of linguistic transition.

Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature and utilizes van Dijk's (2005) approach to critical discourse analysis for the collection and analysis of the discourse data.

Participants

First-language speakers of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking children of Punjabi speakers were selected as the participants for this study. In both cases, only the urban/urbanized population was taken into consideration. Moreover, taking the dialectal variations in Punjabi into account, in both cases, only the population belonging to central Punjab was selected as participants for this study. In short, a total of six families were selected for this study, three Punjabi-speaking families and three Urdu-Punjabi families, that is, the ones where parents were first-language speakers of Punjabi but their children were first-language speakers of Urdu.

Data collection tools

For the purpose of this study, two data collection tools were deployed, namely:

- Interviews
- Dinner-time conversations

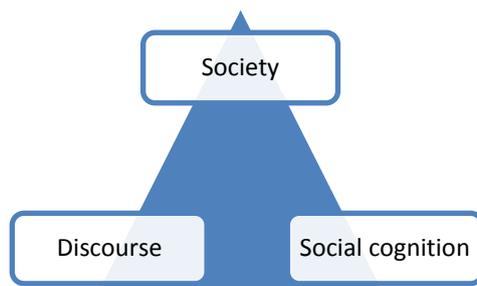
Procedure

Six dinner-time conversations were audio recorded, one with each of the selected families. Similarly, six interviews were audio recorded, three from Punjabi-speaking children and three from Urdu-speaking children of the selected families. The dinner-time conversations were guided conversations during which the focus was maintained on food. Likewise, the interviews were semi-structured and focused on food choices, eating habits, culinary skills and vocabulary, and lifestyle in general.

Analytical framework

Van Dijk's (2005) *ideology analysis* has been employed as an analytical framework for this study. According to him, '... ideologies are typically, though not exclusively, expressed and produced in discourse and communication, including non-verbal semiotic messages, such as pictures, photographs, and movies' (p. 41). The model demonstrates that society, discourse, and social cognition are interconnected. Social cognition, according to Van Dijk, is a set of values, beliefs, and opinions shared by a social group for which ideology provides the basic framework as portrayed in figure 2.

Fig. 2: Discourse Analysis Pyramid



(Source: van Dijk, 2005)

Ideologies, which are both cognitive and social, basically play their role as the boundary between the cognitive symbols and the processes that underlie discourse and action. Part of social cognition is the socio-cultural knowledge shared by the members of a society or culture. Members of a particular social group may also have similar evaluative beliefs or opinions which become organized into social attitudes (van Dijk, 2005).

Due to its emphasis on ideology and social cognition as the frameworks that underlie interaction and social attitudes, van Dijk's (2005) approach of discourse analysis as ideology analysis has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study, which intended to explore the ideologies that underlie the culinary discourses of the Punjabi speakers and the Urdu-Punjabi speakers selected as participants for this study.

Data analysis

The data gathered through dinner-time conversations and semi-structured interviews were analyzed in a step-wise manner for the below-mentioned categories, as suggested by van Dijk (2005) for the ideology analysis:

- Surface structure
- Syntax
- Lexicon
- Local semantics
- Global semantics
- Schematic structure
- Pragmatics
- Dialogical interaction

Results

The following results were obtained after the analysis of the discourse data:

- Significant differences were noted in the food choices of the two groups of participants, that is, first-language speakers of Punjabi (first-generation Punjabi speakers) and first-language speakers of Urdu whose parents were Punjabi speakers (second-generation Punjabi speakers). The first group of participants demonstrated a considerable familiarity as well as a fondness for the traditional Punjabi dishes, such as *saag*, *makai ki roti*, *lassi*, *gurr walay chawal*, *sattu*, etc. However, most of the Urdu-speaking participants showed complete unfamiliarity with some of the traditional Punjabi foods and almost no fondness for the ones that they were familiar with. It was also observed that the parents of the second group of participants, who had preferred Urdu over Punjabi for their children, had made no effort to familiarize their children with the traditional Punjabi cuisine. It can be inferred that when people switch from one language to the other (Punjabi to Urdu in this case), they tend to avoid talking about the foods that were associated with the culture of the abandoned language.
- The Punjabi speaking group showed greater familiarity with the culinary vocabulary, such as: *tulna*, *ghotna*, *sainkna*, *bhigona*, *chhanana*, *chattana*, *dum lagana/daina*, etc.
- A greater McDonaldization influence was observed in the case of the second group of participants which was obviously not only in their food choices but also in their culinary skills as they were found less willing to cook something which required all unprocessed ingredients and took longer cooking time. On the other hand, the Punjabi-speaking participants showed comparatively greater willingness as well as fondness for cooking something traditional.

Therefore, the notions of convenience and standardization, typical of McDonaldization, were a greater concern with the Urdu-speaking group.

- Both groups considered fast food harmful to health. However, two of the participants from the Urdu-speaking group considered it irresistible and lamented the fact that there were few options to choose from.
- The Urdu-speaking participants felt uncomfortable discussing Punjabi foods in their friends' company but most of the time preferred to talk about fast food and sometimes about foods, such as *biryani*, *salads*, *samosa*, etc. which they thought to be more urban. Some of them expressed negative evaluations of traditional Punjabi foods and also of people who preferred to eat them.

Discussion

The results of the study lent clear support to the stance that language transition can be a cause of nutrition/culinary transition and therefore may have serious implications for the culture of the abandoned language. The results of the study are also reminiscent of the flesh and blood metaphor used by Jiang (2000) for language and culture which stated that without language culture would lose its shape. Moreover, the results strongly support Ritzer's (1993; 2000) metaphor of McDonaldization as the Urdu-speaking participants were found more under the influence of the phenomenon as compared to the first-generation Punjabi speakers. Moreover, Popkin (1994), and Drewnowski and Popkin (1997) having studied low-income countries in Asia found out changes in the world economy and rapid urbanization as two of the major factors responsible for nutrition transition in those countries. However, they had completely overlooked the role that language transition might have played in those countries. Lang and Caraher (2001) emphasized McDonaldisation and Americanisation as the main factors behind the culinary skills transition. But, McDonaldization and Americanization would not have proved much influential in non-native English-speaking countries if the people in those countries had remained distant from the English language. The results, therefore, support the hypothesis of the study that maintaining one's native language has strong implications for the preservation of the culture associated with that language.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to bring to light the close relationship between language, food, and culture. For this purpose, three Punjabi-speaking families (first-generation Punjabi speakers) and three Urdu-Punjabi families (second-generation Punjabi speakers) were selected and the discourse data were gathered from them through dinner-time conversations and semi-structured interviews. The data thus gathered were analyzed using van Dijk's (2005) approach to critical discourse analysis. The findings of the study clearly depicted the vital relationship between language, food, and culture by showing that language transition had strong implications for nutrition/culinary transition and, therefore, for cultural loss. Since the study was conducted on a very small scale, a large-scale study on the same model can be conducted to further validate the results of the study. Moreover, conducting similar studies with the speakers of languages other than Punjabi, such as Pushto, Pahari, Saraiki, etc. and even the languages spoken in other countries would serve not only to authenticate the findings of this study but also to further highlight the significance of one's native language for the preservation of one's culture.

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