The Relationship Between Language, Identity and Cultural Differences: A Critical Review

Sultan Hammad Alshammari
Faculty of Education, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia

Abstract
The interrelationships between these terms: language, identity and cultural differences have become a major focus for many cultural researchers and social theorists. It is known that language, identity and cultural differences influence each other and are connected closely to each other. Stuart Hall explained the relationship between them in his article which provided a deeper understanding between the interrelationships among them. This research will review critically Hall's work in the following ways. It will start by discussing the key terms definitions of Language, identity and cultural differences. Thereafter, Hall's theory regarding the interrelationships among these concepts will be discussed in detail. The connections between these concepts will be illustrated by providing some personal examples. Furthermore, some limitations where Hall's theory may fail to address will be presented. This review research aims at offering a deeper understanding of the connections between Language, identity and cultural differences which could assist learners to equip more knowledge about these concepts for their future studies or works.
Keywords: Identity, language, cultural difference, interpretation, Hall's theory.

1. Introduction

'Language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives' (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). Language is the carrier that reflects our identity to others and delivers our culture. Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, p. 2). Culture is not inherited genetically, and cannot exist on its own, however, culture is always shared by society members (Hall 1976, p. 16). According to Hall (1997), there is a strong relationship between the concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences. He argued that while culture is concerned about 'sharing meaning', language is a link that is used to 'make sense' of things, and meaning can be exchanged and produced. He also mentioned that language is essential to culture and meaning and can be considered the key container of the values and meanings of culture. It works through what he calls the 'representational system'. This review will begin by summarizing Hall's (1997) notion of representation, presenting the connection between language, identity, and cultural differences and the importance of these concepts. Then it will provide some personal and general examples to explain the mechanism of that notion. Finally, it will mention some issues that I think Hall may fail to address, which can be considered as drawbacks.

2. Relationship Between Language, Identity and Cultural Differences:

Hall (1997) defines the important concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences and addresses the complicated interrelationship between them and the differences that may affect these three aspects interchangeably. Hall (1997) argues that language, identity, and cultural differences are strongly connected due to the strong relationship between representation and culture. He mentions that culture, as a group of shared meanings, is presented through language, which is a tool that works as a representational system. In this system, symbols and signs whether words, sounds, images, etc. can be used by people to stand and present concepts, feelings, and ideas to others. Hall (1997) considers language one of the 'media' that present thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a culture.

According to Hall (1997), there are many ways of defining the word "culture". Culture can be understood as embodying "the best that has been thought and said" in a society (Hall, 1997, p.2). It is a collection of the best ideas, as shown in different classic works of painting, literature, music, etc. He also defines culture through the context of "social science", where it refers to anything that is distinctive about the way of life of a community, group of people, or nation. This definition can be known as "anthropological". Moreover, culture is used to describe the values that are shared among people or groups in society. Hall (1997) then mentions the "cultural turn" and argues that culture is not a set of things but a set of practices. The culture here concerns the exchange and production of meanings between groups or societies that have similar interpretations of objects. For example, if two people belong to the same culture, then they interpret the world in (roughly) the same manner and present their thoughts, feelings, and themselves in ways that can be understood by each other. It can be said that this culture depends on the participants.

However, some different interpretations can be formed that are based on social practices. It depends on the use and representations of participants that select the language and the meaning to be conducted. As a result, belonging and identity are formed when they talk and communicate with others. Some identities are formed by

different means. For example, through the mass media, people's identities can be represented to others through producing meaning, incorporating and consuming different events, and then regulating them according to social context. On the other hand, identities such as cultural identity are not clearly represented because of the different positions of its participants (Hall, 1997).

Hall (1997) refers to the circuit of culture which consists of five moments production, consumption, representation, regulation, and identity, and they explain the steps and process of producing meaning in a culture. Production is the first step, wherein people create a special meaning of the object. Then they share and consume the meaning of that object among them and regulate the right uses of the meaning to its context. Later on, participants introduce the meaning to others, and at the same time, they represent it as a special identity or mark. It can be said that there is no starting or finishing point in that circuit because meanings are produced synergistically.

Hall mentions that representation by language is central to the process of producing meaning, as languages construct the meanings of different objects. Due to their function as constructional components, words, sounds, colours, and physical gestures are essential. They have some ideas and concepts of objects and can deliver them to others, thus the cultural difference is introduced. As a consequence, special identity will be formed because identity is relational (Woodward, 1997). For example, when fans of one football team use a special slogan, they, in fact, introduce the language that presents their culture, and that indicates to whom they belong, and their identity in the sense that they are different from the fans of other teams. Moreover, producing new meaning or historical truth can be reflected by the functions of visual language (Hall, 1997). For instance, when an exhibition shows the objects of other cultures, it may introduce the history of these cultures or may create new meanings. It may also reflect the identity of people who attend the exhibit and those who are exhibited.

Hall (1997) states that meaning gives us a sense of our identity, including who we are and with whom we belong. Meaning is produced and exchanged in every social and personal interaction. Members of the same culture should have and share the same sets of concepts, ideas, and images that let them think and feel about the world and interpret the world in similar ways. They should share the same cultural codes. In other words, ideas and concepts must be shared by members while they speak or have great knowledge of a unified language. Therefore, a conventional view which describes things as they exist in the world according to their natural characteristics and materials in the first, then according to their representation, can be changed by the cultural turn, which means that meaning is created rather than existing. The role of representation appears in the social constructional approach because culture is considered one of the fundamental points in the process.

According to Hall (1997), language presents a general frame of how representation and culture work. He mentions two approaches: the semiotic approach deals with how representation works and with how language produces meanings and the discursive approach is concerned with the effects and results of representations. He adds that constructivism, which is a model of its approaches -semiotics and discourse- can display the effects of representation, knowledge, and relationships with power as well as a historical specificity. Furthermore, he believes that there are no wrong or right meanings because meanings change according to its usage, context, and historical events. They are governed by power, emotions, and feeling, so they play a big role in identifying others in terms of excluding or including them, especially once 'identity is marked out by difference' (Woodward, 1997, p. 9).

To conclude, the notion of Hall (1997) concentrates on representation, which is considered an important and essential factor that plays a major role in forming the complicated process between the three aspects of language, identity, and cultural difference. It also focuses on the representation process that shapes ideas, feelings, and concepts in a simply interpreted form by the use of correct meaning in a culture. While meaning is exchanged between participants using the same shared cultural codes, they can communicate and reflect their culture and identity to others.

3. Examples For Illustrating The Relationships:

There are several examples that support Hall's (1997) notion of the connection between the concepts of language, identity, and cultural difference. Three examples are provided to explain that connection. The first example is personal from my own life and happened to me when I was living in a Western Culture, specifically in Australia a few years ago, while the second example is from the daily life and interaction in Saudi Arabia, and the last example will be from my religion, which is Islam.

First, when we as Saudi people go to shops such as a grocery store to buy some goods like dates or coffee, usually we ask the seller about the quality of the products by asking this simple question: 'is it good?' This question asks whether the goods are in a high quality. When I was in Australia pursuing my master's degree a few years ago, I remember that I went to an Australian grocery store with a little English language to buy some Mexican dates that I found. I just picked up the dates and asked the seller the same question that I used to ask it in Saudi Arabia, 'is it good?' The seller looked at me with an angry face and said, 'What do you mean by saying "is it good?"' I was really surprised by his tough reaction and tried to explain the meaning of the question. The

seller might interpret my question wrongly and thought that I was doubting about the quality of his goods and stuffs.

From this example, we can see the difference between Saudi and Australian cultures and also the different meaning given to the words 'is it good' (language). In Saudi Arabia and some other Arabic countries, this means that the product is of high quality, while in some other communities or cultures it may not mean anything or it may mean something else. I think Hall (1997) was right when he mentioned that meaning gives us a sense of identity, like who we are and with whom we belong. Meaning is produced and exchanged in every social and personal interaction through the use of language. Members of the same culture should have and share the same sets of concepts, ideas, and images (Hall, 1997). I think that statement is correct because we as Saudis share the same ideas and concepts in our daily interactions, and when we try to apply these reactions in another society or community, it may not work or be understood by others according to the different culture and identity.

The second example is from our daily interaction and life in Saudi Arabia. People in every society and community express some special behaviour or reaction to show some kind of respect when they deal with others. In Saudi Arabia, we have been taught by our parents and teachers to receive things from others using only our right hand when we deal with them because it's considered respectful and polite. For example, if I visit my friend in his house and he hands me a cup of coffee or tea, then I have to get it with only my right hand. Even when we want to have some food, we have to use only the right hand for eating because we follow the instruction of Islam. According to Salama in the Hadith 728, 'The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said to me, "Say the name of Allah and eat with your right hand and eat what is in front of you"' [agreed upon]. Although some other cultures consider receiving things or eating with the left hand to be normal, we would consider one who uses his left for eating or receiving things impolite or disrespectful. Therefore, from this example, we can see the difference in culture and difference in meaning that given to this "reaction". This custom of 'getting things by the right hand or even eating by the right hand' is considered polite and respectful in some cultures, while other cultures may not consider it a big deal. The meaning of this custom of course gives us a sense of our identity, which distinguishes us from others. So, we regulate a cultural concept that was originally generated by our parents and ancestors and also represent it through language 'interaction' or even through our facial expressions (Hall, 1997).

The last example is from my religion, Islam. Islam is similar to many other religions in that it is based on several foundational principles. Shaking hands and expressing a long greeting in Arabic is one of these principles. When we as Saudis meet other Arabian or Muslim people, we usually greet them by shaking hands with the right hand because that's considered a sign of a good relationship between us. This is one custom that forms our identity. If someone does not respond to our greeting or shake hands, that means there is something wrong or something strange is happening, and that person may be angry or in a bad mood, so we try to get an explanation from him and help him if he has any problems with his life. This behaviour may be totally different from what is shown in the West because of the cultural difference, and people in the West may find the behaviour strange or misunderstand it unless they receive an explanation. From this point, we as Saudis produce this specific concept and consume it, shaping our identity and representing it through the use of our language.

4. Limitation of Hall's views:
I think that Hall's (1997) notion perfectly addresses the relationship between the three concepts of language, identity, and cultural difference. However, I might mention two issues that I think Hall's notion may fail to address. The first issue is that Hall (1997) mentions that meanings cannot remain stable over long periods despite changing contexts. I would disagree with that idea and think that there are some meanings that can remain stable over a long period and even through changes of context. For instance, many aspects of Arabic culture have not changed over thousands of years, and the meanings of them have become stronger and may be used more. For example, the Arabic words 'As-salaam Alaykum' means 'peace be upon you'. These words still have the same meaning, and most people in Arabic and Muslim countries still use these words for greeting each other even though there are many other words that can be used in place of them.

A second issue is that Hall (1997) mentions that identity changes. It seems to me that his notion is right except for some identities, such as national and religious identities. Immigrant people are one example. They have left their countries to live in different countries. Most of them keep their national identity in their memory. By 'national identity', I don't mean their nationality but their family, religion, neighbourhoods, etc. Thus, their identity is still the same. Religious identity is another example. I will mention the Islamic identity here. It is a fact that Muslim people have a strong belief that is hard to be changed wherever they go. Their beliefs are not restricted to the place or time. For example, I have met a lot of Muslim people in Western culture, specifically in Australia, who are from different backgrounds, and they still keep their religious beliefs and practice Islam in their life. Therefore, their religious identity is kept the same.

5. Conclusion

It can be clearly seen that there is a strong relationship between the three concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences. Some key points and ideas about Hall's (1997) notion of representation and the complex relationship between language, identity, and cultural difference have been summarized in this literature review. Some examples have been provided to illustrate the interrelationship between language, identity, and cultural difference and how they coexist and affect each other spontaneously. Lastly, it has mentioned to some issues that can be considered as drawbacks, as Hall (1997) might fail to address them perfectly in my opinion.

References

Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices. London: Sage.

Hall, S. (1997). Cultural identity and diaspora. In K. Woodward (Ed.), Identity and difference (pp. 392–403). London: Sage.

Hogg, Michael and Dominic Abrams. (1988). Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes. London: Routledge.

Kramsch, C. (1998). Language and culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salamah, U. (Hadith). The Book About the Etiquette of Eating. Al-Bukhari and Muslim, Book(3), Hadith (728).

Woodward, K. (1997). Introduction. In K. Woodward (Ed.), Identity and difference (pp. 8-12). London: Sage.

Sultan Hammad Alshammari received the Bachelor degree of Education in Computer from University Of Hail, Saudi Arabia in 2009, and Master of Education in ICT from Monash University, Australia in 2013. He is currently a Ph.D researcher in Faculty of Education in UTM, Malaysia. He works as a lecturer in the Department of Educational Technology, University of Hail.