

Language, Culture and Identity: A Saudi Perspective in the Light of Stuart Hall Argument

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Abstract: There is little doubt that the world has become smaller and human interactions have increased exponentially. “Multilingual” and “multicultural” are common words today. All major cities in the world are cosmopolitan, characterized by the presence of different languages and cultures them. Moreover, the spread of technology has contributed to the process by enabling people to learn different languages and recognize other cultures. Against this backdrop, the interrelationship between language, identity and cultural difference is an important topic for cultural researchers and social theorists. The analysis of this relationship is interesting and developing into a complex field of study. Stuart Hall is a well-known and influential figure in social theory and has examined the relationship between language, identity and cultural difference. He argues that language, identity and cultural difference are closely connected (Hall, 1997). First, this paper seeks to provide a critical review of Stuart Hall’s efforts to define and explain these concepts. Then, the importance of and the relationship between language, identity and cultural difference is illustrated with an example from my life, the example is analyzed and interpreted in the light of Hall’s notion of representation. Finally, an important issue that Hall fails to address is discussed.

Key words: culture, identity, Stuart hall, international education

1. Introduction

In order to accurately understand the connection between language, identity and cultural difference the concepts must first be clarified. Firstly, “language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). Language helps us express ourselves and connects us with our environment (Joseph, 2004). Although “linguistic codes” are predominant parts of language, language also exists in different modes such as sounds, gestures and images. Hall (1997) describes language as “the privileged medium in which we make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged” (p. 1). Secondly, culture is knowledge in the widest possible sense. It includes the traditions and history of a group, its common sense, beliefs, values, attitudes and language (Taylor-Leech & Riely, 2009). Hall has classified culture in two categories: traditional and modern. In the traditional sense, “culture is said to embody the best that has been thought and said in a society” (Hall, 1997, p. 2). However, in the modern paradigm, culture refers to “the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of

the majority of ordinary people and is called the mass culture or the popular culture of an age” (Hall, 1997, p. 2). Finally, identity can be of a group and/or personal. The paradox of identity is that on the one hand it is about sameness, i.e., common aspects shared with other groups, like being Australian or Christian and so on, and on the other hand, identity is also about being unique, our individual characteristics and the inimitable part of our self (Joseph, 2004).

2. Summary of Stuart Hall Argument about the Connection between Language, Identity and Cultural Difference

To summarize Hall’s argument (1997) the correlation between language, identity and cultural difference can be understood by analyzing the bi-lateral relationship between the concepts. Thus, the relationship is divided into three aspects: the relationship between language and cultural difference, the relationship between language and identity, and the relationship between identity and cultural difference.

Language and cultural difference are closely linked. Hall (1997) explains that shared meaning is produced by culture. Therefore, people who have the same culture, “interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other” (p. 2). Language operates as a representation system, enabling human beings to create and share meaning that is a product of culture. Moreover, language can embody cultural differences because it signifies practice. According to Hall (1997), language is a symbolic practice that expresses the idea of belonging to a national culture. Hall affirms that subjects have no meaning without a cultural context and demonstrates it with an example of a stone. He says that a stone is meaningless by itself and is just a solid rock until cultural contexts transform it into a marker, a piece of art, and so on. For instance, in the Islamic culture, the “AlhajarAlaswad”, is a stone that carries symbolic value. It is the corner stone of the “Alkaaba” building, which is one of the most sacred Islamic sites. Muslims consider this black stone to be holy because they believe that it comes from “Paradise”. Moreover, if a certain subject or “thing” has its own value within a culture, the language of that culture will have several names for it. The Lion as an animal, for instance, has its own value in Arab cultures; it is considered as a symbol of strength, greatness, leadership and courage and has more than a hundred names in Arabic.

The second relationship is between language and identity. The interaction between language and identity is articulated in Hall’s article wherein he states that identity is formed and constructed by language and culture. According to Hall (1997) meaning is what gives us a sense of who we are and with whom we belong and hence, the identity of people is represented by language or other systems that function like language. This includes various forms of communication that generate meaning such as technology, narratives and mass media. He uses the example of a football match where the national identity of fans is manifested in different practices that are characteristic of certain groups. Language can be compared to a mirror that reflects one’s changing identity. It plays an integral role of in the process representing one’s identity.

The third aspect is the relationship between identity and cultural difference. Hall (1997) argues that identity and cultural difference are also closely connected. On the one hand, identities are constructed by cultural differences. Hall (1997) points out that culture is a complex concept that can be understood as different groups of people with different ways of life. Therefore, the function of cultural difference is to distinguish and preserve group identity. On the other hand, people who live in a particular community or social group may have the same way of life, similar worldviews, feelings and ideas. According to Hall (1997) “members of the same culture must

share, broadly speaking, the same cultural codes” (p. 2). Thus, culture can be regarded as a kind of identity. So far, the connection between language, identity and cultural difference has been discussed without exploring the concept of ‘difference’ in depth. To sum up, language constructs a certain identity for people and gives meaning to cultural belonging or maintaining a group identity. Hall (1997) states that acknowledging the connection between language, identity, and cultural difference is important to understanding the individual meaning of each concept.

3. Examples from My Own Life and Its Interpretation

Here, I narrate a brief story from my childhood and the contribution of language, cultural difference and identity in shaping my character and my world view. I was born in “Bahrah”, a town between Mecca, the religious city and Jeddah, in the western region of Saudi Arabia. I was raised in a middle-class family and studied in a public school that offered free education for all students. When I was 14, I joined the Islamic Education Group in school as part of my extra-curricular activities. The decision changed my life. The Islamic Education Group encouraged its members to be successful students and religious individuals at the same time. Although Islam as a religion has its own value in every Saudi’s life, this group encouraged us to become an “Imam” which is “scholar in Islam”. The school hours in Saudi Arabia are from 7:30 a.m. till 1:30 p.m. and from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. I enrolled for “Tahfeez”, which are evening classes in mosques to memorize and understand the Holy Quran. In two years I had already memorized it, and I became Imam and worked for more than ten years at the local mosque. Although there are six compulsory units on Islamic education in primary and secondary schools, the religious teachings of the Islamic Education Group were unique because they focused on practical learning. These teachings shaped my personal idea of cultural identity and lifestyle.

I graduated from King Abdul Aziz University, located in Mecca, and was offered the post of an assistant teacher in Umm Al-Qura University. This enabled me to pursue my graduate and post-graduate studies in the field of education. In line with the government policy for higher education, I was to be sent to study in the United States of America. I was apprehensive about visiting the United States because I had heard, mainly from media reports, of the negative treatment of Muslims in general and Saudi Muslims in particular, especially after 9/11. Therefore, I decided to study in Australia because I believed that it would be a better option than the U.S, especially because of its tolerant attitude towards Muslims. Going to Australia was my first international journey and it was the first time that I would be away from my parents and my entire family. I was sad to leave my big family and even more so to leave my mosque, where I had served as the Imam for more than ten years. The day of travel was very difficult but I prepared myself by reading about life in Australia and particularly Melbourne. I was greatly concerned about the next six years of my life in Australia as I did not know what to expect. Most of my concerns were related to cultural differences. I wondered how I would deal with people from different backgrounds, languages, cultures, religions and identities. Would they accept me as a 26-year old Arab with Islamic identity? Would they accept my wife who wears a hijab and covers her face in front of people? I wondered about the impact of the Australian system of education and culture on my three-year-old daughter. My itinerary was Jeddah–Doha–Melbourne and the first leg of my trip from Jeddah to Doha was uneventful, and we encountered people who were dressed similar to us and the women wore hijab. It was from Doha to Melbourne that the cultural differences began to manifest. My daughter asked me why women in Melbourne did not wear hijab like her mother. It was difficult for me to answer her. My wife told her that “we wear the Hijab because we are Muslims and we have to obey God who commands us to wear it but that non-Muslim women don’t because

they have a different culture”. I could read from people’s facial expressions that they thought us to be strange. I had never been outside my country, before I came to Australia and I had never interacted with people from different cultures and although I realized that the perceptions of Muslims would be different in other cultures and places, I did not know what to expect. I knew that certain issues that were important to some people may not hold the same importance for others who do not believe in religious observances, which is the most important thing in my life. Since my arrival in Australia, I have interacted with people from different cultures, nationalities and backgrounds. I have come to realize that Islam or being Muslim has different implications and. As a result when issues like women in Islam are discussed, misunderstandings occur between people. Therefore the question raised here is why are certain issues viewed and interpreted differently in the Islamic world than in the other parts of the world? The answer to this question leads to the notion of representation. Certain issues regarding Muslims and Islam are perceived differently by the representational systems in the western media.

For example, I would like to compare the representation of women in Islam and my personal view on women as a Muslim on one hand and the representation and perception of Muslim women in the West, on the other. Women in Islam are valued; a Muslim must respect his/her mother, appreciate and obey her especially as she ages. God Says “And We has enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship” (Quran, 46:1). Moreover, our prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) said “Paradise under the feet of mothers” (Albukari, 1997). It implies that one must obey his/her mother to reach paradise in the hereafter. There are numerous verses in the Holy Quran that command Muslims to obey and respect the woman as a mother. Women as wives are also respected in Islam; a husband has to give money to his wife even if she is rich and has to respect and appreciate her because the basis of a happy family is a happy couple. The prophet said “the best among you is the best to his family” (Albukari, 1997). However, in certain sections of the Western media, Muslim women is represented as oppressed by men having no rights. According to the Australian scholar, Lichter (2010), the Sharia (Islam) law is harmful to Muslim women in Australia. These types of representations lead to erroneous attitudes towards Muslims. One day, I was shopping in a Mall with my wife and daughter when a few elderly women shouted “Why do you force your wife to wear the hijab?” I replied quietly “You can ask her if she does not want to wear hijab; she can take it off now!” “No one has forced me to wear hijab; I am following my religion and it is my personal freedom”, answered my wife. The oldest woman said, “I respect your personal choice but I hear through media that Muslim men force their women to wear hijab”. Thus, different representations create misunderstandings between cultures. I grew up in a Muslim culture and have been taught that Islam guarantees rights to women and accords them an important place in society. The woman is considered the cornerstone of a family. Therefore, I believe that Islamic teachings are the best for women. However, my Australian friend argues that Western civilization has given women rights that they did not have in any civilization. Thus, the contradiction is in the representation of women. Hence, the notion of representation is very crucial in understanding language, identity and cultural difference.

4. Relating the Examples to Stuart Hall’s Ideas

It was after reading Hall’s ideas that I was able to describe and interpret those events as a complex interrelationship between language, identity and cultural difference. Hall (1997) argues that most aspects relating to a person can be reduced into oversimplified and narrowly defined stereotypes. I agree with Hall and argue that this logic can be applied to the representation of Islam by certain sections of the Western media. I believe that Islam

is a way of life that touches every aspect of people's lives, controlling the relationship between the human beings on the one hand, and the relationship with God (Creator), on the other. However, I have met a many people in Australia who have oversimplified and exaggerated notions of factual information such as Muslims do not drink alcohol, Muslims do not eat pork and Muslims women are uncivilized because they wear the hijab.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall (1997) asserts that 'stereotyping deploys a strategy of splitting, "it distinguishes the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable" (p. 258). The stereotypes about Muslims confirm the conflict between the Muslim idea of "normal and acceptable" and the Western idea of "the abnormal and the unacceptable". In his book, "The Clash of Civilization", Samuel Huntington (1993) states that there is a clash between the Islamic and the Western worlds. A few of my friends who have come to study in Australia are suffering from identity crises especially when they enforce the stereotypes that are created through this representation. In fact, they are dismissive of certain Islamic teachings such as wearing the hijab for women because they have interacted with people who associate the hijab with oppression and regression.

5. An Important Issue that Hall Fails to Address

Hall (1997) questioned the nature of cultural identity and identified two elements of it. The first is the essentialists' perspective on cultural identity, which it can be viewed as one that is collective and stable, something that "people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (p. 223). Conversely, non-essentialists perceive cultural identity as multiple, individual and flexible, and "focused on differences as well as common or shared characteristics" (Woodward, 1997, p. 11). Hall is an advocate of the second view and argues that we should not look to identity as something that has been completed, fixed and settled. He argued that cultural identities "undergo constant transformation" (Hall, 1997b, p. 225).

I partially agree with non-essentialists' perspectives about cultural identity, and suggest that there should be a middle perspective that combines the essentialist and non-essentialist views, especially when considering Islamic law and culture. It could be argued that the essence and reality of Islamic law and culture have not changed in their roots. For instance, since the beginning of Islam, Muslims have believed in one God and that Muhammad is His last Messenger; they pray five times daily; give Zakat charity, 2.5% of their annual income, to the poor; fast during the month of Ramadan; and strive to complete the Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca at least once (Long & Maisel, 2010). However, how to interpret tenets of Islam is not fixed — there is some flexibility. For example, leeway is given to accommodate Muslims praying while travelling on an airplane, praying when they are sick and confirming the beginning of Ramadan either by sighting the moon or calculating its rise (Long & Maisel, 2010).

6. Conclusion

In this literature review and reflection, I have summarized Stuart Hall's argument about the connection between language, identity and cultural difference. In addition, I have used Stuart Hall's notion of representation to understand the importance of the relationship between these factors. I have shown how reading Hall's ideas has helped me interpret events that I describe in terms of the complex interrelationship between language, identity and cultural difference. Finally, I have written about an important issue that Hall fails to address.

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