

The Construct of Personal Choice within Individual Language Shift: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

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Abstract : Choosing one's primary language may not be as common as choosing an additional foreign language to study or use during travel. In some instances, however, it becomes a matter of internal personal struggle, as language is tied not only to specific circumstances but also to human background and identity. This phenomenological qualitative study focuses on the factors affecting the decision of a person to undergo a language shift. Specifically, it considers how these factors relate to identity negotiation and expression. The data for the study include the analysis of published autobiographical narratives and personal interviews conducted using the Responsive Interviewing model. While research participants come from a variety of geographical locations and have used different reasons for undergoing their individual language shift, the study identifies a number of common features shared by all the participants. Specifically, while all the participants have been able to maintain their first language to varying degrees of proficiency, they have all completed the shift to establish a primary language different from their first. Additionally, the process of self-identification is found to be directly connected to the phenomenon of language choice for each of the participants. The findings of the study further tie the phenomenon of individual language shift to a more comprehensive issue of individual life choices - ethnic revival, immigration, and inter-cultural marriage among others. The study discusses varying language roles and the data indicate that language shift may occur whether it is a symbolic driving force or a secondary means in fulfilling a set life goal. The concept of language addition is suggested as an alternative to the arbitrariness of language shift. Thus, instead of focusing on subtractive bilingualism or language loss, the emphasis becomes the integration of languages within the individual. The study emphasizes the importance of the construct of personal choice in its connection to individual language shift. It places the focus from society onto an individual and the ability of an individual to make decisions in matters of linguistic identification.

Keywords : choice theory, identity negotiation, language shift, psycholinguistics

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