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Great Aunt Edna's Vase: Metaphor Use In Working With Heritage Language Families

Abstract

This article explores the use of a particular metaphor – Great Aunt Edna's Vase – as a means to facilitating multilingual families in contextualizing and engaging with complex emotional connections as linked to language, identity, and belonging. Building from the premise that language is linked to the construction of identity, but that individual family members will have different views and opinions on the heritage language within this context, the article highlights the use of metaphors in family work, before introducing the metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's Vase and situating it in relevant literature around language, heritage, and identity. The concepts introduced add to the existing body of literature in addressing the growing need for work specifically aimed at multilingual families, in a globally ever-more-diverse society, highlighting the links between language and well-being, and making a contribution to the global knowledge necessary for practitioners and families to explore these links successfully.

Introduction

The use of metaphors in family therapy work has a long history, with earliest models of family relationships being modelled on imagery in the 1960s (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Framo, 1965). While many of the existing metaphors explore the family as a whole, or specific roles within the family, there is also a history regarding the use of metaphors to relate certain aspects that are part of family life, such as faith (Smith, 2017), death (Llewellyn et al., 2017), or grief (Goldberg & Stephenson, 2016; Nadeau, 2006), to name but a few. Metaphors can help to define reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and in doing so, they have the power to

change the focus of this reality. By applying metaphors to specific contexts, certain features of this reality may be explicitly highlighted, whereas others may be disregarded or diminished (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pocock, 1999). In an increasingly diverse society, mental well-being among multilingual and multi-ethnic communities is coming increasingly into focus (Whaley & Davis, 2007). While there is literature on providing counselling either for couples who are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Tien, Softas-Nall & Barritt, 2017), or for children alone (Linde, 1986), work that focuses on the whole family is comparatively sparse (Softas-Nall, Cardona & Barritt, 2015). This may be because of a hierarchical family structure adopted in some cultures, preventing children from being active participants in family discourse (Daly, 2005; Pećnik, Matić, & Milaković, 2016; Softas-Nall et al., 2015), an aspect that becomes particularly apparent in family language choice and family language policy (Author, 2017).

However, engaging families in conversation about language choice, and opening up avenues of recognition that different family members may have different views, is vital in understanding contexts where the family language may be an issue of contention (see Okita, 2002), and can be particularly important for monolingual practitioners working in multilingual contexts (Softas-Nall et al., 2015). Fauber and Long (1991), for example, draw together a variety of literature to explore the role of the family in child behaviour and mental well-being, emphasising the importance of a supportive and inclusive family environment.

This paper explores the affordances of one particular metaphor – Great Aunt Edna's Vase – as a way to help family members in multilingual contexts to review their and others' emotional links with the heritage language, by likening the language to a vase that gets passed down the generations, with each generation and individual developing their own emotional response to this inheritance. While emotional connections to heritage languages have seen various explorations in the literature (Chen, Kennedy & Zhou, 2012; Okita, 2002),

the explicit link to mental health is receiving increasing attention (Czubinska, 2017; Author, 2017), especially in work that considers the entire family, and intergenerational relationships. Bi- and multilingual children are not simply double or multiple monolinguals, and the intricacies between language and identity need exploring from a multilingual, rather than a monolingual perspective (García, 2009). The metaphor explored in this paper has been used extensively as part of lectures, public engagement events, and in research as conversation starters. It is here fully conceptualised and theorised to critically engage with its applicability in the family and social work context, contributing at both a theoretical and a practical level to the current knowledge base, thus addressing the needs of an ever-growing diverse society (Whaley & Davis, 2007). In the following, this paper draws briefly on literature outlining the use of metaphors in family work, before introducing the metaphor of Great Aunt Enda's vase itself. It then moves on to explore the literature in relation to the concepts underlying the metaphor, highlighting both applicability and limitations.

Metaphors in Family Work

The metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's Vase is not solely aimed at family therapists, but rather intended as a conversation starter between families and teachers, social workers, or support assistants. Nevertheless, the frequent use of metaphor in therapy work warrants a close look in this context, in order to understand its affordances and shortcomings. Metaphors provide a non-threatening way to talk about emotionally complex concepts, providing both distance and relative safety (Cederborg, 2000). Stories, words, sentences, poems, or memories have all been successfully integrated as metaphors into family therapy (Angus, 1996; Chesley, Gillett & Wagner, 2008). Although both may be an appropriate approach, the

use of metaphor may be driven by families, rather than introduced by a specialist (Sims & Whynot, 1997).

By providing a study specifically focusing on Chinese families, Liu, Zhao and Miller (2016) have made an important contribution to the knowledge base on metaphors in family therapy. They argue that the use of metaphor in collectivist societies and cultures may add further value by facilitating a means to discuss problematic issues in an environment which would typically encourage keeping such issues private in order to save face (Dwairy, 2009). As discussed below, the metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's vase thus holds potential advantages in decontextualizing emotive connections between language and identity in multilingual family contexts.

While metaphors may provide a shortcut to enable families to talk about certain aspects or issues, their use needs to be critically evaluated to ascertain no long-term damage will occur from internalization of the metaphor (Cederborg, 2000). However, 'the examination of metaphors can be used not only to reveal unstated assumptions in theories but unstated assumptions in families' (Davies, 2013, p. 68). From a holistic, developmental perspective, therefore, a metaphor may be helpful in inviting families to consider alternative stances and viewpoints, without necessarily having to subscribe to the metaphor wholeheartedly or permanently. In the following, I introduce the metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's Vase, contextualizing it in view of the literature on heritage language, identity, and parenting, and illustrating its potential use in bringing theoretical concepts closer to families.

The Affordances of Great Aunt Edna's Vase

In liking the heritage language to a vase which may be passed down the generations, family members are facilitated to take a more external or distanced view on emotional attachment, allowing the metaphor to open up alternative viewpoints in a less threatening

way. Like any inheritance, the person inheriting may have multiple complex, and sometimes conflicting, emotional reactions. The metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's Vase facilitates the exploration of these. Great Aunt Edna can, of course, be renamed to suit cultural circumstances, although the name itself can help with thinking about the concept of emotional attachment in a more abstract way. The metaphor of a vase also brings with it connotations of fragility, an underlying concept of the implications that any damage to the vase might have, which is further discussed below.

In inheriting the vase, the inheritor may love it just as much as Aunt Edna did, in its own right, and treasure it. Such investment without the emotional influence of memories and shared history may be comparatively rare, and attachment to either vase or language is more likely to be influenced by a certain level of remembrance and history-making. This, however, goes hand-in-hand with the notion of 'inheriting' the language: it is rarely an immediate inheritance (first the language is not part of family life, then it is), instead, children could explore, through the metaphor, what it means to love something very much, and then to pass it on to somebody else.

This leads to the more common scenario, where one may love the vase (i.e. language) because of shared memories linked to it, and therefore choose to treasure and nurture it – maintaining the language, akin to putting the vase on display. In this instance, the vase not only reminds us of Aunt Edna but, through shared memories, has become a treasured object in its own right. In terms of heritage language acquisition, this may not mean that children have the same expectations of themselves as their parents do, but that there is an internalized attachment and willingness to engage. Mills (2001), working with third generation Urdu and Punjabi speakers in Britain, showed that children were able to express their own reasons for wanting to maintain the heritage language, both emotional (e.g. communication with extended family, and a sense of identity) and practical (e.g. employment opportunities).

While some of these were instilled by parents, others had developed individually, with children taking ownership of the 'vase.'

In juxtaposition to this, memories can be ambivalent, or even negative. This may lead to holding on to the vase out of a sense of shared history and potential family obligation, but not feeling particularly close to it. The vase will not be given pride of place but may be kept in a cupboard, half-forgotten. Later, when the inheritor has children of their own or through another critical incident, the vase may be remembered as something worth passing on. Wong Fillmore (1991) explores the ways in which a loss of language may lead to a loss of culture, too, linking language, culture and identity. These links are not necessarily universal, and maintaining cultural connections is possible without necessarily being a confident language user (Kumar, Trofimovich & Gatbonton, 2008), possibly leading to a hybrid identity (Harris, 2006; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

On this sliding scale of emotional connectivity, the inheritor may also decide that they simply do not like the vase. Maybe they never did, feeling no sense of connectivity or belonging, the vase does not fit with the way the inheritor sees themselves, their lifestyle, or their sense of identity. At the earliest opportunity, the vase is removed. In later years, this decision may be regretted, and efforts to find a similar vase may take place; however, there may be a lingering feeling that something precious was lost. On the other hand, however, the decision to give up the vase may never bother the inheritor at all. This interpretation raises the question at what age parents allow children to have their own preferences and opinions with regard to the heritage language, a question which is doubtless related to parenting practices (Daly, 2005; Pećnik et al., 2016). However, if identified early, it may also be an opportunity for parents to help children establish emotional links for themselves, rather than by proxy.

What becomes obvious through the use of metaphor is that emotional attachment can be established by proxy, and that this emotional link can be strengthened through shared history, joint memories, a sense of ownership, and independently developed emotional attachment. Within the metaphor, Great Aunt Edna's liking the vase may initially be a reason to keep the inheritance; however, without one's own connected history, maintaining an engagement can be difficult. The metaphor may thus not only help families in expressing their initial viewpoints, but it could also help them understand how they may work together to facilitate individual emotional connections. Following this introduction to the metaphor, the following sections break down the underlying concepts in more detail, contextualising 'Great Aunt Edna's Vase' through the relevant literature.

Family Language, Home Language, or Heritage Language?

Research and work with multilingual families is defined by the lack of descriptors, more precisely, the absence of a singular term which accurately serves to incorporate the many complex family situations. Therefore, many researchers choose a definition that best describes their particular context and focus, and it is important to understand both the terminology and complexities in order to gain a better understanding of the field and the particular affordances of Great Aunt Edna's Vase within this context.

It is important to understand the ways in which definitions and terminology seek to categorize both the family and the family's respective languages. This becomes problematic as soon as we look beyond the term 'family', to the concept of 'family members,' and explore how terminology may in fact be divisive, as well as unifying. When we speak of a 'multilingual' or 'bilingual' family (Softas-Nall et al., 2015), for example, we refer to a family where multiple languages are spoken; however, such families may still include monolingual family members (Okita, 2002) or even a language which parents choose to teach

to their children for non-heritage-related reasons (King & Fogle, 2006). Similarly, terms such as family language (Strobel, 2016) and home language (Kang, 2013; Mcgroarty, 2012) imply that the family – or home – has a specific language, which is different from the community. This supports the view of family and home as specific, ubiquitous, social constructs, not taking into account individuality within the home or family. Frequently, the terms 'home language' and 'family language' are used in direct juxtaposition to 'school language' (Guhn, Milbrath & Hertzman, 2016), establishing the idea that each context is distinctively associated with a single, specific language. In reality, many families communicate in more than one language on a daily basis, arguably sharing multiple 'home languages', one of which may also be the societal (or 'school') language. The notion of family language policy somewhat extends this but focuses primarily on when and by whom certain languages are spoken within the family (Spolsky, 2012) without necessarily taking into account emotional connotations. From another perspective, there is the focus on the child as a 'main character,' situating the child's language experiences within this context. This focus, which has led to the classification of six different environment types typical for bilingual acquisition (Romaine, 1995), is useful in outlining the complexity of the field but requires further in-depth engagement to support family work. All these terms are useful and accurate in their own contexts, and the point here is not to undermine or disprove them. Instead, the focus is on identifying a term which may be used in conversation with families without making assumptions about individual family members (e.g., calling it a 'family' language when not all family members apportion the language equal status).

The term 'heritage language,' which is supported by the metaphor of Great Aunt Edna's vase, implies that a language is passed down through the family (Baker, 2011) and specifically points out that such inheritance is not inevitable (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu's notion of evitability is in contrast to previous work. For example, Romaine (1995) argues that

research into bilingualism is somewhat dominated by middle-class families, where bilingualism may be a choice, and thus open for discussion, rather than a practical necessity. Romaine dubs these two scenarios 'elite' and 'folk' bilingualism and rightly highlights the need for differentiation. Nevertheless, having to accept an 'inheritance' does not mean that one does so willingly and may still lead to family discord which may be alleviated by facilitating a more mutual understanding.

Unlike 'family language' or 'home language,' the term 'heritage language' explicitly seeks to distance itself from the inevitability and forced inclusivity that is implied in the first two terms. However, the notion of heritage may hold strong connotations with social constructs such as 'tradition' and 'duty' (Kang, 2013), as well as being of potential religious importance (Glinert, 1999). Linking heritage to social or emotional concepts encompasses, for example, Bourdieu's notion of capital. Bourdieu (2000) stated clearly that 'only when the heritage has taken over the inheritor can the inheritor take over the inheritance' (p. 152), thus problematizing complex emotional links between heritage and identity. These complexities can usefully be discussed by giving the heritage language an externalised 'identity' in the form of Great Aunt Edna's vase, discussing notions of both inheritance and heritage.

While the term 'heritage language' is particularly useful in family work, it undoubtedly comes with its own limitations. Families may have multiple potential heritage languages but choose one over another, or even choose a language which is not actually 'inherited' but important to the parents for social, cultural, or economic reasons (Author, 2017), including transnational adoption (Shin, 2013). It is here that Great Aunt Edna's Vase may hold particular potential as a metaphor, because all family members may hold separate – and often unvoiced – views of the family language (Author, 2017).

Emotion, Identity, and Belonging in Multilingual Families

The maintenance of the heritage language is inextricably linked to notions such as identity (Czubinska, 2017; Author, 2017; Norton, 2013) and belonging (Mills, 2001; Norton, 2013; Tien et al., 2017). In previous work, I highlighted the link between heritage language, identity, and mental well-being as being particularly unexplored in the family context (Author, 2017), because emotional attachments are both more difficult to express and more difficult to justify between family members. Partners and children may therefore not only not share the emotional connection to the heritage language, but may also be unaware of it in other family members (Author, 2017), necessitating a means for families to jointly explore each other's emotions and feelings in relation to the heritage language. One existing tool for this is Krumm's (2001) language portrait that encourages children to colour in a human outline to represent their various languages as part of themselves. The technique has been successfully used in heritage language research with younger children (Martin, 2012; Seals, 2018) to explore how children internalize their various languages, but it is not typically used with families as a whole. While the language portrait is highly personal, the metaphor around Great Aunt Edna's Vase extends the practitioner's toolkit by a more decontextualized way to discuss language within the family.

Parents frequently have particular expectations of their children's heritage language development and if not met, can lead to parental disappointment and the children developing a sense of failure (Piller, 2002). Within the family context, it is not just the children who might be assessing their linguistic identity. Piller (2002) shows how linguistic identity is responsively constructed and negotiated, a concept that is further illustrated by Palviainen and Bergroth (2018) in their work with multilingual parents. Among Palviainen and Bergroth's (2018) participants, a 'bilingual' identity was essentially viewed as a birthright and could not be claimed later in life. This notion of a 'birthright' that cannot be attained later in life can usefully and gently be challenged through the use of metaphors, such as Great

Aunt Edna's vase, which the inheritor may come to love eventually, despite initial misgivings. The metaphor facilitates the exploration of evolving, personalised, emotional connections, rather than assuming a default mental position. As such, it can help to address the parental fear that if they take a more relaxed approach, the child's bilingual identity will suffer (Author, 2018).

Limitations and Applications – Stretching the Metaphor

Like any metaphor, Great Aunt Edna's Vase can only be a partial representation of a family's complex connections with their family language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pocock, 1999). The 'vase' analogy focuses on emotional connections, because this is an aspect less frequently made explicit in the intergenerational family context (Author, 2017). Practical applications of the heritage language, such as requiring children to translate for parents, thus do not translate as easily to the metaphorical context. However, such practical necessities are more easily understood within the family, and less frequently questioned, harking back to Romaine's (1995) differentiation between 'elite' and 'folk' bilingualism. When one considers that a vase is both a functional and an ornamental object, the functionality can be further integrated into the metaphor. While parents may wish to encourage children to take on the heritage language - 'Great Aunt Edna's Vase' – in its entirety, children may choose to like the functionality of a vase, but adopt a much more serviceable model (e.g., in the metaphorical context, a water jug or a different kind of vase). Thus, they may choose to adopt the spirit of heritage language maintenance but be happy with an incomplete, different, or purely instrumental adaptation (e.g., language for basic oral communication, rather than literacy).

The fragility of the vase stretches and endangers the metaphor. In a practical application of the metaphor during an interview, an eight-year-old boy who had a great dislike for the heritage language suggested that 'smashing the vase' would be a good way to ensure that he never had to see it again. Seeing his mother's reaction to this statement made him re-consider the definitiveness and finality of such an action and ultimately opened up family communication. The incident aligns with Cederborg's (2000) warnings about the potential dangers of metaphor use, in this case, both regarding the emotional reaction of the mother and the guilt the child expressed after realizing his mother's reaction. Ongoing work is needed to ensure such statements are not left behind for families to deal with unsupported.

Another shortcoming of the metaphor is the notion of inheritance as a whole, because it implies a death in order for the inheritance to take place. In family work, this shortcoming actually leads to additional potential for the facilitation of conversation: unlike an inheritance, which sometimes happens without the inheritor being aware of an item's history, parents have countless opportunities to make the language emotionally meaningful to the child. So if during their engagement with the metaphor, family members open up about emotional connections that have previously been kept private (Liu, Zhao & Miller, 2016), these can be discussed, and further connections can be made for the child to establish their own meaningful links to the inheritance.

Conclusions

Seeking to contextualize the complex relationships between language, identity, and belonging when working with multilingual families can be painstaking and difficult for both the practitioner and the family members, even more so when the practitioner does not share similar experiences (Nguyen, 2014; Softas-Nall et al., 2015). Within this context, a metaphor such as Great Aunt Edna's vase can help both practitioners and family members in exploring

emotional attachment and a sense of identity through a narrative tool that is deliberately removed from the family's daily context. Within the long use of metaphors in family work, Great Aunt Edna's vase occupies a specific niche for addressing the particular needs of multilingual families, at a time when such families are becoming increasingly common in today's multi-diverse society (Whaley & Davis, 2007). As such, the metaphor makes an important contribution to the field's ability to problematise and theorize notions of identity, multilingualism, and heritage, not only as a theoretical tool but through real, practical application of the metaphor in family work.

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