

Language, Education and Society: Multilingualism in India

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Introduction

India is said to be a sociolinguistic giant, and this giant is huge and different from the ordinary. The nerve system of this giant is multilingualism. Indian multilingualism is enormous in size, with over 1600 mother tongues reducible to about 200 languages for a population of about 1.27 billion people, with the population of many of the linguistic minorities being larger than many European countries (Annamalai, 2001). According to Li Wei (Wei, 2000), “Language is a human faculty: it coevolves with us” and monolingualism, which even in normal circumstances is a rare phenomenon, is beyond imagination in a context such as India where English has coexisted with indigenous languages over a long period. In fact, the magnitude of multilingualism in India has made scholars wonder about how communication happens and how social cohesion is maintained (Annamalai, 2001).

Since time immemorial, India has been a multilingual country. Through more than four millennia of known history, the linguistic families which co-existed together have continuously interacted with each other and achieved a pan-Indian character which is unique in itself, firstly, in the matter of sentence structure and, secondly, in the number of shared items of vocabulary (Prasad, 1979). In fact the world itself has now entered a phase of globalization where the phenomenon of bilingualism/ multilingualism has become the norm.

Multilingualism, Language Inclusion and the Role of Schools

Multilingualism in India is a product of its history and a reflection of its diverse cultures. Schools play a vital role in maintaining multilingualism and in changing its nature. Planning for the development of Indian languages starts at the school level to ensure, in theory that it allows the multilingual base to continue. For the students, the motivation to learn several languages arises from advantages which might possibly act as incentives for learning more and more languages. These advantages range from better jobs to enjoying diverse cinema, reading magazines and travelling.

The difference between the language that minority children speak at home and the language they use in school is one of their distinguishing features. If the language the child brings to the classroom is derided and stigmatized, and no academic strategy is adopted to give such children competence in the school language so that they may study as equals to the majority language children, they develop an inferiority complex. This in turn affects their personality. Language is therefore both the cause and the symptom of an inefficient education system. In the latter sense, language is only an indirect cause of lower opportunity, low social status, and therefore, discrimination (Pattanayak, 1981).

The multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural character of India necessitates the inclusion of several languages in the curriculum for school

education. Studies reveal that for the stakeholders in school education, the inclusion of several languages in the school curriculum is not considered to be an additional load. However, in the fulfilment of their objectives, students come across several difficulties from the pedagogic, curricular and environmental areas. The most important ones among them, in order of descending difficulty are:

- confusing to learn grammars of different languages (pedagogic)
- no occasion to use the language for practice (environmental)
- no extra coaching at home (environmental), and
- many other subjects to learn (curricular).

Teachers mostly emphasize the environmental and curricular difficulties, and attribute the least number of problems to the pedagogy of language teaching. However, according to the students, the least number of problems arise from the curricular front. In spite of the difficulties, the students continue to work since they are highly motivated to learn several languages and are encouraged in this task by their parents (Srivastava, Shekhar, & Jayaram, 1978).

Multilingualism: Individual and the Classroom

The economics of monolingualism is such that two languages are considered a nuisance, three languages uneconomic, and many languages absurd. But when many languages are a fact of life and a condition of existence, restrictions on the choice of language use is a nuisance and one language is not only uneconomic, but absurd. Our current education system tends to make people monolingual in a dominant language. According to Pattanayak (1981), the notion of one dominant language as the medium of instruction leaves thousands of children illiterate

in their mother tongue and fosters low achievement levels in the dominant language itself. There is no doubt that language is a major factor in the case of school dropouts and stagnation in education. To a great extent the high rate of illiteracy, especially in tribal areas, can be attributed to the acceptance of the notion of one dominant language in a state and the lack of proper language planning.

We often hear educators making statements such as “Multilingualism may be a great asset in life but it is a major obstacle in pedagogy”. Such statements make two claims about multilingualism: one in the context of real life and the other in the context of pedagogy. In both these contexts, although the construct of multilingualism is the same, it is applied to different spaces—the individual and the classroom respectively. The construct appears to be that multilinguality implies the presence of more than one distinct language in a given space. There is an old saying, “A man who knows two languages is equivalent to two men”. This is because a person who can speak many languages can communicate with people from those language backgrounds easily and hence have a wider social life and effortlessly fit in a new place. Therefore, multilinguality offers a lot of autonomy to an individual, and is an asset in terms of acceptance into a different language culture. If an immigrant can speak the language of the natives, he or she is considered a member of the native community, albeit tentatively. This acceptance offers a sense of security to the individual and hence becomes very important for his / her wellbeing.

Multilinguality also brings with it the opportunity to read and understand the literature of different languages which is a great asset as it offers a variety of perspectives and the key to a huge repository of codified knowledge. In a world where knowledge of the codified form is power, and access to that knowledge is limited, a

multilingual literate is indeed privileged. A multilingual literate enjoys a greater privilege than one who can only speak different languages. In fact, in a world of disappearing geographical boundaries, it is hard to find people in positions of power who are not multilingual. Multilinguality offers a political edge and is hence a great advantage.

A multilingual classroom, however, is not the same as a multilingual individual. In a multilingual classroom context, students belonging to different language backgrounds sit together under one roof, but they may or may not be able to communicate among themselves. This becomes challenging for the teacher as she cannot teach students who do not understand the language she speaks. There are several instances of such challenges and teachers, therefore, enter a multilingual classroom of the above nature hesitantly. Moreover, pedagogy also includes spaces beyond classroom interaction such as writing textbooks for a multilingual audience and incorporating sensitivity to different language speakers. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the teacher, through pedagogy, to cultivate the right kind of milieu because second language acquisition also depends on the formal language acquisition contexts (Agnihotri, Khanna, and Sachdev, 1998). The teacher is hence faced with an insurmountable challenge.

The reason for such fears, however, is not unfounded but only uninformed. We forget that children are adaptable and that there is a mutual relationship between the learner and his environment. It is highly exaggerated that multilingual classrooms offer no communicative possibility among the students themselves, and between the students and the teacher. The “multilinguality is an obstacle” claim presumes a high degree of non-communicability. Situations with a high degree of non-communicability have no sustenance and lead to adaptation. Both the teachers and students adapt to the

circumstances and learn to communicate with each other eventually. This adaptation of our language behaviour is due to our multilingual nature.

A common argument against this adaptability could be that it is difficult to teach a foreign language in a classroom where it is a huge challenge to communicate. It would require the individuals to possess instrumental or integrative motivations (Agnihotri, Khanna, and Sachdev, 1998) for learning to happen. This may be true of monolingual classrooms—an opposite of the above construct—but in multilingual classrooms, the motivation to communicate would already exist in children because of their multilingual milieu. This is especially true of children growing up in cities where the population comprises of immigrants from different language-speaking backgrounds. These children adapt to speaking in one common as well as many languages, and develop the required motivation to learn more than one language.

The problem also lies in how we commonly construct the idea of multilinguality—it is seen as the acquisition of more than one language. However, since language boundaries are porous, there is no “a language” (Agnihotri, 2007) and everyone is multilingual. After all, sounds are the basic components of all languages and these sounds are shared between languages. Again, all human languages function in terms of constituents that have an internal consistency and the patterns of these constituents are not infinite. They vary, for example, along the parameter of a language being verb-final or verb-medial. Verb-final languages such as Hindi have postpositions, e.g. *mez par* ‘on the table’ but verb-medial languages such as English have prepositions, e.g. ‘on’ comes before and not after ‘table’. Hence, language teaching can benefit immensely in a multilingual classroom.

The question then boils down to teaching other subjects, and the challenges associated with

them in a multilingual classroom. The argument for this is that when it comes to words and meanings, the relation between them is arbitrary and therefore there is no commonality between languages. This argument holds ground if we do not dig deeper into how multilingual children associate words with languages. The multilingual mind looks at words in a very different way. When the idea of 'one pure language' is absent, multilingual children acquire a new vocabulary without language categorization.

Conclusion

Education is probably the most fundamental monopoly element in an in-egalitarian social and economic stratification. Language is the key to understanding the mutually reinforcing relationship between language use, elite formation and vertical growth of education, unequal opportunities, and greater social and economic inequality. Taught mother tongue (different from home mother tongue), imposed standard and superposed languages do not only accentuate the existing inequalities, but also introduce inequalities where none existed before.

Accepting the fact that the linguistic landscape of India is extremely complex, we have not paid enough attention to the language problems in education in proportion to their primacy and functional importance in the entire framework. It is necessary to adopt a pragmatic approach to linguistic usage in education, and take into account the mechanisms of standardization of language in plural societies. Multilingual and multicultural education requires, apart from positive attitudes to speech variation, a degree of planning, proficiency in the language of the classroom and that of learners, and a high level of skill in teaching. The understanding of the socio-cultural process is considered incomplete without an understanding of the dialectical relationship between language, education and society.

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