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Linguistic Human Rights and Multilingual Education: Report from an Indian University



Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India

Linguistic Human Rights and Multilingual Education: Report from an Indian University¹

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Abstract

This paper will report on the designing and teaching of Masters-level courses on multilingual education and linguistic human rights. These courses are being offered at a private, not-for-profit Indian university which has an explicit social justice agenda. The deliberately diverse student body offers unique opportunities to explore multilingualism in the classroom and in society: a July 2019 class of 46 students had between them 35 languagenames!

The essay first sets out the somewhat unusual background of the University. It then gives an overview of some aspects of the University's diversity. Thereafter, we describe a few of our courses on multilingualism, their objectives, and some pedagogic strategies. The university aims to create reflective practitioners for the social sector – especially in education, development and public policy. There is therefore a discursive coherence between the various courses in the Masters programmes. Students are particularly receptive to arguments about discrimination, exclusion, equity, rights, and policies. However, while class, caste, gender and region are familiar axes of exclusion, there is much less awareness among students of the intersectionality of language as reflecting, constituting, and reproducing privilege, discrimination and exclusion. The courses on multilingual education and linguistic human rights thus build on the strengths that the programmes and the students already have.

The courses then seek to go beyond, inviting students to critique existing linguistic inequalities, and devise an innovative curriculum and pedagogy. The essay ends by sketching two initiatives of the University that will help to develop critical perspectives on India's multilingualism, and design educational and policy interventions which strengthen mother-tongue based multilingualism and contribute to the building of a just, equitable, sustainable and humane society.

This paper reviews the experience of teaching these courses, and suggests some possible future directions.

Keywords: multilingual education, linguistic human rights, social justice, education, curriculum, pedagogy

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Introduction

This paper will report on the designing and teaching of Masters-level courses on multilingual education and linguistic human rights. These courses are being offered at Azim Premji University, or APU, in Bengaluru (also called Bangalore), in India. The first section of this paper gives some background to set the University in its context. The second section provides details about courses being offered which focus on multilingual education and linguistic human rights. The third and last section raises some larger issues, and proposes some areas of future work.

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Background

The Azim Premji Foundation was started in 2000 by the philanthropist Azim Premji. The Foundation has been working with the elementary education system in rural government schools. The Foundation soon discovered that there was a shortage of professionals who could work in the education sector: good teachers, teacher educators, people who could design education programmes, implement them, and evaluate the implementation – all these skills were hard to find. The Foundation therefore decided to set up a university to prepare such professionals. Thus, in 2010, by an Act of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, Azim Premji University, or APU, was set up in Bengaluru.

The Foundation and the University realized that to prepare professionals in the education sector, they need professionals in overlapping and interlocking sectors. Hence, Masters programmes were also started in Development and Public Policy. Further, a School of Continuing Education brings together expertise from the University and the Foundation to conduct in-service capacity-building programmes for education functionaries at all levels. The University also set up a School of Arts and Sciences to address the serious gaps in the training of undergraduates in India. After common foundational courses in understanding social reality and developing critical thinking, the undergraduate programme ensures that science majors take some humanities and social sciences as minor subjects and, similarly, humanities and social sciences majors take science courses as their minor subjects.

Azim Premji University, like the Foundation which sponsors it, has an explicit social purpose. For the University, it is a vision of contributing towards creating a just, equitable, sustainable and humane society. See Santhakumar (2019) for a discussion of the strategic choices made by the Foundation and the University. Faculty and staff are hired for their alignment with this vision of the University.

The University is funded by the Foundation. This means that University does not need to recover costs from student fees. This opens up in far-reaching ways the admissions process to the University. Candidates no longer need to be evaluated on whether they can *afford* the programme. In the 20-40 minute interview for every Masters programme candidate, a panel of faculty members looks for only two things: first, academic competence, so that we have a sense that the candidate can cope with the academic demands of the programme; and second, the panel tries to understand what can be called 'the fire in the belly' of the candidate – what is it that bothers them, angers them? And what do they want to do about it?

These fire-in-the-belly conversations are often the most interesting part of our admission interviews. Life-stories, understandings, and dreams – all these emerge. You know that you *want* this student in the University; in your class, in fact. And because one does not need to worry whether the student can afford the fees, such students *do* end up in your class!

As a result, the University is a diverse space in many ways. Here is the student profile of the 2019 postgraduate cohort:

- 51% of the students were from rural India or from small towns
- students came from 26 of the 29 Indian states
- 57% were women
- 55% received financial assistance
- 21% of the Masters students had more than two or more years of work experience, and 41% had some work experience

This diverse student body is then offered diverse courses. For example, three courses offered in the July 2019 semester included the following: in the School of Education, "Introduction to Early Childhood Education"; in the School of Development, "Contemporary Social Movements"; and in the School of Policy and Governance, "Law, Technology and Human Rights". These are courses that seek to foster a "systems-thinking" – a point we will come back to later.

As may be imagined, students from such diverse backgrounds – many of them first-generation learners – are particularly receptive to arguments about discrimination, exclusion, equity, rights, and policies. Further, across the large differences in life-worlds of the students, much peer-learning happens. And these various courses provide a structured context in which to broaden and deepen their understanding.

Not surprisingly, this diversity in the student body is linguistic as well. The cafeteria at lunch time is full of multilingual chatter and laughter. With every batch of students, we also do a basic language audit to get a sense of the languages in the classroom (details below). In the July 2019 semester too, we did a quick language audit in the course, "Studying Language and Literature". This class of 46 students had, between them, 35 distinct language-names: from Assamese and Bhojpuri, through Gondi, Konkani and Malayalam, to Tulu and Urdu!

Courses on multilingualism and linguistic human rights

After this overview of the University, we move to some of our language-related courses. Within the MA Education programme, we have a focus area called "Language and Literature Education" area that offers overview and perspective-building courses on the study of language and literature, and literacy and language pedagogy. Here are some of the language-related courses that we have designed and taught over the past four years: "Language, Mind and Society"; "Language in Education"; "Literature in School Education"; and "Teaching English Language in India". Apart from these courses, we also offer horizon-widening "Open Courses" – that is, open to students across our Masters programmes, not just to those in the School of Education. Among these is "Esperanto and Linguistic Democracy" – a course we will come back to later.



The course documents of all these courses emphasize India's multilingual reality. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from the "Rationale" for the course "Language in Education":

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In a multilingual setting like India, the relationship between language and education is crucial and complex. More often than not, our language policies in Education are a result of contingent, political expediency rather than a product of pedagogic, research-based understanding of issues. Current research in bilingualism and multilingualism indicates that learning in the mother tongue offers a strong cognitive base for learners and that fluent articulation in the mother tongue will be carried over to the context of learning in a second language. Unfortunately, this principle which could have been so enabling in the multilingual Indian context has been sidelined to accommodate the interests of the market, right from colonial times to the neocolonial present. In the process, while education in the mother tongue medium is starved for want of political will and economic resources, English medium education is impoverished due to the lack of a strong cognitive base for learning [which is] rooted in a lived context of experience. (APU, 2018c, p. 1)

We have already mentioned the language audit that we do. In the language audit, students start by listing their major, regional languages – Kannada, for example. Only later do they mention the regional varieties that they know: Bhojpuri or Nimadi, for instance. Indigenous (or Tribal) languages are usually the last to be mentioned – Kodava or Lamani. Students soon see that they have already internalized a hierarchy of languages: high-prestige, low-prestige, and no-prestige. Occasionally there are also disputes. One student declared that, "Konkani is not a language; it is only a dialect of Marathi!" Needless to say, the Konkani speakers in the class were not amused.

As students list the languages they know, many in the classroom are hearing several of these language-names for the first time. Indeed, they are surprised to learn just how many languages there are in India; and most have never wondered about the details of the various estimates (Rao, 2014b; Jhingran, 2009). Inevitably, there are questions about the number of English-speakers in India – once again, there is surprise at how widely estimates vary: from under 1% to 33% (Rao, 2011)!

A quiz on linguistic diversity worldwide proves to be a revelation. In April 2018 in a quiz, the 43 students in the class estimated that there were 6-20 languages in Pakistan. The database Ethnologue lists 74. Students guessed that there were between 2 and 30 languages in Australia; Ethnologue says 400! See Table 1, below, for more estimates.

S. no.	Country	No. of languages – Student estimates	No. of languages – Ethnologue estimates (Simons & Fennig, 2018)
1.	Afghanistan	2-6	41
2.	Australia	2-30	400
3.	Brazil	6-50	238
4.	Indonesia	5-500	719
5.	Nigeria	1-15	526
6.	Pakistan	6-20	74
7.	Russia	5-20	113
8.	USA	4-100	232

Table 1. Student estimates of number of languages in some countries, Azim Premji University, India, April 2018.

These students, who see themselves as reasonably well-informed about the world, are dismayed to discover that their estimates have been off by one or even two orders of magnitude!

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After the language audit and the discussion on linguistic diversity, other topics are explored. One direction that the discussion takes is to explore the idea of the mother-tongue. Following Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, p. 106), students begin to see that the mother-tongue is not the self-evident category that it seems. Mother tongue can be understood in various ways: chronologically (the language one learned first); by identification – both internal (the language one identifies with) and external (the language one is identified with); by competence (the language one knows best); and by function (the language one uses most). Students – especially speakers of small and low-prestige languages and language-variants – thus learn to re-perspectivize the language deprecation that they themselves have faced, and develop a richer picture of their own language profiles. Students have reported that when they themselves begin to engage professionally within the educational sector, they are more sensitive to language variation and the discrimination this variation often causes.

Students develop a better understanding of their linguistic 'division of labour'. They begin to see how their various languages are in a complementary relationship – what Ajit Mohanty has called the "smooth functional allocation into different domains of use" (Mohanty, 2019, p. 23). As he notes, "Languages are neatly sorted into non-conflicting spheres of activities such as home language, language of the market place, language for religious rites, language for formal/official purposes and for inter-group communication and so on. Under such conditions of multilingual functioning, domain allocation of languages acknowledges the fact that no single language is sufficient for communicative requirements in different situations and occasions and, hence, individuals need multiple languages" (Mohanty, 2010, p. 134). Moreover, students begin to see that this is a *dynamic* equilibrium; a 'plurilingualism' in the sense that the Council of Europe usefully defines it – varied and changing competencies of the individual in several languages, depending on need and context (2001, pp. 133, 188; 2018, p. 28).

With this emerging understanding of the complex interplay between the plurilingualism of the individual, and the multilingualism of the environment, it becomes possible to discuss practices—such as code-switching, code-meshing, translanguaging, and sites such as a translanguaging space—and Thirdspace (for an overview of these and related terms, see García and Wei (2014), especially chapter 2). These discussions about the fluid boundaries between languaging practices in a multilingual society allow for alternative imaginations of language to emerge. For instance, it becomes possible to imagine a relational paradigm; language not as a 'thing' that one 'acquires', but as a kind of imaginative and communicative environment. As Mark Fettes evocatively describes language, "we grow into it, we learn to dwell in it, in the same way that a bird or an animal grows into a niche, a habitat, a territory" (Fettes, 2016, p. 6). These ideas about a linguistic ecology resonate well with the systems-thinking that students are learning in their other courses (that was mentioned earlier), all the while exploring alternatives to the status quo, to 'business as usual'.

As noted earlier, these students are especially receptive to questions of social power and privilege. They are, in some sense, primed to investigate the sources of linguistic power. With a little facilitation, students arrive at some 20 to 25 factors that make a few languages more powerful than most others. A few of those commonest factors that they converge upon

are: number of speakers, geographical spread, script, literature, religion, caste, administration, judiciary, education, trade, colonization, globalization, and mass media. They soon see that all those sources of linguistic power are extra-linguistic; that unequal power between languages depends on historical, social and political factors. This then is an insight that remains available through the course when discussing language, privilege and inequality.

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Besides the language audit, and the discussions on linguistic diversity, mother tongues and sources of linguistic power, in some of these courses students also do an analysis of proverbs – specifically, proverbs as cultural texts. Once again, in a facilitated session, students list a couple of dozen features of proverbs. They note the length and rhymes of proverbs; their cultural specificity and, simultaneously, their claims to universality; their humour, sarcasm, sexism and ethnic stereotyping. They note how proverbs are firmly embedded in the power dynamics of the community. In other words, they learn to read proverbs as complex cultural texts – at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic or discourse levels. As an assignment, they then pick one or two rich, 'juicy' proverbs in their languages and analyze them. The task often takes them back to the elders in their communities, and underscores the mother tongue as a *knowledge* resource – a fact often overlooked in an English-language dominated educational landscape. Course feedback shows that students find the proverb-analysis exercise quite rewarding.

This awareness of the multiple levels at which language may be examined has several uses. In the course "Teaching English Language in India", this awareness informs the class-observations that the students need to do as an assignment for the course. Now that students have learnt about multiple linguistic levels, they build that awareness into their class-observation framework. They pay attention to pronunciation and diction in teachertalk. They notice the syntax of, and language variation in, student-talk. And they also remark on the pragmatics of the classroom – the code-switching and translanguaging, how the inter-student talk flows; how the teacher talks, and with whom.

As a final example in this section on the kinds of multilingual courses at Azim Premji University, let us turn to the Open Course that was mentioned earlier – the course called "Esperanto and Linguistic Democracy". Here, the understanding of linguistic diversity, sources of linguistic power, and the multiple levels at which languages operate is a starting point for asking another set of questions:

- What features at each level must an effective international language have?
- What constitutes an *easy* language?
- What is a *fair* language system for a multilingual context?
- How is politeness encoded across languages and cultures?
- And what forms might a highly culture-specific idea like politeness take in an international language?

These questions frame the exploration of the planned language Esperanto as a case-study to understand the following aspects of the politics of language: linguistic democracy, fair communication, and linguistic human rights. For students from the School of Education, this course also offers an opportunity to investigate language-pedagogy questions such as:

- How does the learner's first or home language affect their Esperanto learning?



Does Esperanto-learning follow the same path and pace as the learning of any other language?

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- Do some language backgrounds confer an advantage, and conversely others a disadvantage, in learning Esperanto?
- Does Esperanto-learning facilitate the learning of other languages any more than the learning of any language makes it easier to learn a subsequent language?

These are some of the questions students ask about what language teachers can learn from Esperanto (Rao, 2014a). It is worth emphasizing that the aim of the course is not the learning of Esperanto (although a few do join the University's Esperanto Club as a result of the course). The focus of the course aligns with some of the widely shared values of the Esperanto movement – for example, those listed in the 1996 Prague Manifesto (Wikipedia contributors, 2018). (Interested readers may consult Gledhill (2000) for a grammatical overview of Esperanto. Further, Owen and Meyer (2019) and the website Lernu.net offer good resources for English-language speakers to learn the language.)

In all these courses, discussions of language and power, and communicative justice lead to issues of language policy, the provisions in the legal system for various languages, and the emerging international field of linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Students learn to tease out the implicit language policies in educational policy documents, and reflect critically on them. Locating language rights within a human rights framework allows students to see language as a structural or systemic property of social dynamics, empowering some and disempowering many – in short, language as a site for the social reproduction of power.

These courses aim to present three arguments in favour of mother-tongue based multilingual education. The first argument is what may be called the *ecological* argument. Much knowledge about biodiversity maintenance is encoded in small and vulnerable languages (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 35-42). Therefore, from a purely instrumental point of view – that is, setting aside any ethical arguments – these small languages need to flourish. For a language to flourish, it must be an essential part of the education system (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The second argument is the *human rights* argument. This presents linguistic human rights as an inalienable part of human rights, social justice, and the deepening of democracy (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017). The third argument is the *cognitive skills* argument. This provides the research evidence for the efficacy of a mother-tongue based education. The learner learns much better – not only content subjects like science or history, but competence in the mother tongue also enables effective learning of other tongues. With a solid foundation in the mother tongue, the learner develops high-level cognitive skills – essential for academic success in the near term, and effective citizenship in the long term (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Heugh, 2009; Jaekel et al., 2017; Mohanty, 2019, pp. 205-207).

In sum, these are students already primed to analyze social reality along the axes of class, caste and gender. The courses outlined above enlarge their analytical toolkit by adding language. Going forward, when the University begins its doctoral research programmes, it is hoped that some of these students will choose to investigate more systematically India's multilingual reality.

Two initiatives at Azim Premji University will facilitate such research. The first is the launch of MA Education programmes in Hindi and Kannada. The University's commitment to equity and inclusion implies that it cannot be an English-only university. Far too many

are excluded because of the English barrier. Besides, several studies show that English-only mass education in India is largely an illusory promise (Rao, 2017). These programmes in Hindi and Kannada will open up new lines of research in language in education, from textbook analyses to comparative studies. The second initiative that will facilitate multilingual research is an archive of schoolbooks. The University, with several partner institutions, is embarking on an ambitious and long-term project of setting up "an open access, multimodal, collaborative, international archive of schoolbooks and artefacts related to school education" (APU, 2018d).

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To conclude, this essay has tried to show that Azim Premji University offers unique opportunities to explore the possibilities of education in a richly multilingual democracy. The essay has outlined some Masters courses and their pedagogic strategies. These courses seek to develop perspectives on linguistic human rights and multilingual education. The essay concludes by sketching some initiatives that offer several opportunities to develop critical perspectives on India's multilingualism, and design educational and policy interventions which strengthen multilingualism and contribute to the building of a just, equitable, sustainable and humane society.

Let us end with a poem that we often return to in our courses to underscore the profoundly intimate and political nature of our use of language. The poem is called "The Quiet World" (1998) by Jeffrey McDaniel.

"The Quiet World"

by Jeffrey McDaniel

In an effort to get people to look into each other's eyes more, and also to appease the mutes, the government has decided to allot each person exactly one hundred and sixty-seven words, per day.

When the phone rings, I put it to my ear without saying hello. In the restaurant I point at chicken noodle soup.

I am adjusting well to the new way.

Late at night, I call my long distance lover, proudly say I only used fifty-nine today. I saved the rest for you.

When she doesn't respond, I know she's used up all her words, so I slowly whisper *I love you* thirty-two and a third times. After that, we just sit on the line and listen to each other breathe.



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