Teaching Linguistic Diversity through Linguistic Landscape[1]

Rizwan Ahmad

Introduction

While cultural, political, ethnic, and religious diversity of India is often highlighted in the school curricula, its linguistic diversity, as represented in the variety of languages, dialects, and scripts, and the presence of multilingualism—the ability to use more than one language—does not receive similar academic attention. India is home to thousands of languages and dialects belonging to the four major language families namely Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic. Many of these languages are so different that they are mutually unintelligible. For example, speakers of Hindi, Tamil, and Manipuri cannot understand each other.

In addition to Hindi, the official language of India and English, the associate official language, there are 22 languages that enjoy the constitutional status of scheduled languages. However, the number of languages used in the print and audio-visual media, and on the web is much higher than this number. For example, Bhojpuri which is spoken in Eastern UP and Bihar, does not enjoy an official status, but is widely used in film dialogues, songs, and on the web. In fact, there is some written literature in Bhojpuri as well.[2]

Furthermore, in the 2001 census, a large of number of speakers of different languages reported that in addition to their own mother tongues, they speak other "subsidiary" languages (Mallikarjun, 2010). This suggests that a significant number of people use multiple languages in their daily sociolinguistic encounters. This societal multilingualism has been incorporated into the educational system in the form of the three-language formula.[3]

We don't really need statistics to prove that India is characterized by multilingualism; it is a part of our sociolinguistic existence. It is common to find people who can speak up to two or three languages and / or dialects in addition to their mother tongues. For example, an educated speaker of Bhojpuri is also likely to know Hindi and possibly English. If they have lived in Patna, it is quite likely that they also know some Magahi. In Bihar, I have often heard people in trains and buses discussing politics in their dialects and then shifting to Hindi with the occasional use of words from English.[4]

The linguistic diversity of India is not limited to the use of languages and dialects in oral communication; it can also be seen in the use of different scripts and writing systems used across India. Books, newspapers, pamphlets, brochures, etc. are printed in a large number of languages and scripts including those that are not part of the official scheduled languages. One robustly visible example of linguistic diversity is manifested in the use of various languages on public signage. In the globalized world of the 21st century, public signs have become ubiquitous; we are surrounded by them. They are unique in that they represent both languages and their scripts. These signs include those installed and managed by the central and state governments as well as those put up by individuals and private commercial businesses. Examples of the former include signs on roads

and government buildings; the latter includes signs on private properties such as houses and commercial properties such as shops and hotels. In sociolinguistics literature, these linguistic objects that mark the public space are referred to as Linguistic Landscape (henceforth LL).

While the cultural diversity of India is highlighted in the school curricula, its linguistic diversity does not receive much attention. When it does, the instructor does not exploit the rich symphony that languages and dialects create in the day-to-day lives of students. Consequently, students are not able to establish the connections between the classroom and the real world of languages. In this paper, I will outline a methodology for using data gathered from public signs and billboards (known as linguistic landscape) by students and teachers, as a resource to connect to linguistic diversity and issues related to language. I will further argue that the use of such data and the involvement of students in gathering it can lead to active and enhanced learning.

Using Linguistic Landscape as a Teaching Resource

Linguistic diversity as evidenced in multilingualism, language mixing and switching, lexical borrowing, etc. has been an object of academic inquiry for sociolinguists for quite some time. In recent years however, scholars have started to study the use of language and scripts on public signage as a window to understanding the larger social and cultural aspects of languages and their speakers. Pioneered by Landry and Bouhris (1997) as a way to study the linguistic vitality of languages in Canada, the field has now grown and expanded to include various socio-cultural aspects of language, including issues of language policy, status and prestige of different languages and the social identity and power they symbolize (Ben-Rafel, Shohamy Amra & Trumper-Hecht, 2006). In other words, the study of LL encompasses the whole ecology of language including the social factors that make language a social phenomenon.

Viewed from this angle, the linguistic landscape of a city or town is a site of cultural representation using linguistic objects such as languages and scripts. Since all cultural representations are ideologically informed, signs are also cultural objects that index certain social identities and positions (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005). This is what makes signs a great entry point for students to explore the relationship between languages and their differing and often competing symbolic values among different groups. Signs are also interesting objects of inquiry as students are familiar with and surrounded by them. The recent controversy surrounding the renaming of Aurangzeb Road as A .P.J. Abdul Kalam Road is a testimony to the ideological power of signs.

In the rest of the paper, I will give examples of how teachers and students can bring signs from around their neighborhoods and use them in class as a resource for a meaningful and engaging discussion on language, multilingualism, social representation, language policies, and language rights. Both the method and the material I will discuss have been informed by recent studies on learning and teaching that favour a student-centered learning approach in which teachers are facilitators of the process of learning; they are not considered a repository of knowledge from which students automatically partake. This is not to say that teachers do not have to be knowledgeable. The point here is that the knowledge of teachers will not necessarily translate into students' learning unless teachers empower them to engage in active and meaningful learning.

Data Collection

An effective way to engage students in learning is to design teaching materials and activities that

are novel and interesting. Collecting teaching materials for their own learning in class is something that students find interesting as well as empowering. To them, this shows that the teacher has confidence in them, and therefore they work on the project with greater interest. Students do not need expensive cameras to do this project. They can use their mobile phones to take pictures and then they can print them on ordinary paper. The pictures should be clear enough to see the languages on the signs. If cameras or phones are not available, students can be asked to take notes on the use of languages on public boards and describe them in class. In this way, students can learn to work as ethnographers and understand sociolinguistic objects.

The class can be split into groups, and each group can be assigned the task of collecting pictures of signs from the cities and towns around them. To ensure a comprehensive coverage of the data, individual groups may be assigned different tasks. For example, Group 1 can be assigned the task of collecting pictures of road signs; while group 2 can focus on signs on the government buildings. The next group can focus on commercial signs. Another group can take pictures of private signs put up by individuals on their homes. The teacher can also join in the activity and bring pictures of signs. He / she can ask the students to submit their portfolio of pictures with their names in advance so these can be used for lesson planning.

Data Analysis and Exploration

Given below are four signs taken from different parts of Delhi. I will attempt to demonstrate how these signs can be used to teach students the socio-cultural dimensions of language and script. This exercise will not only develop awareness about languages and scripts, but it will also help the students to think critically about the broader socio-cultural anchoring of a language. Although

the study of linguistic landscape has now become quite vast and a number of issues can be examined using LL data, I will limit my study to four issues namely:

(1) Who decides which language to use on the signs and who is the target audience of such signs? Does this affect the choice of language on the signs?

(2) Which languages appear on the signs and what does that tell us about the language policy of the government or the institution[5]?

(3) What do the signs suggest about the social and political values of the speakers whose languages appear on the signs and those whose languages do not?

(4) In multilingual signs, does the order in which languages appear on the signs, from top to bottom or left to right, suggest a power hierarchy?

These questions are by no means exhaustive; they have been given here only as examples to get students thinking about the social issues surrounding language use. Instructors are encouraged to create their own questions based on the materials they are dealing with and the students in class. The questions may differ depending on whether the class is taking place in a small town or a village in Kerala or metropolitan Delhi.

Figure 1. Photograph of a road sign in Delhi.

Figure 2. Photograph of a sign on a building in Delhi.

Figures 1 and 2 show two types of government signs that constitute the linguistic landscape of Delhi. There are differences in the use of languages on these signs. In addition to Hindi and English, the two official languages of India, the road sign in Figure 1 contains two more languages—Urdu and Punjabi. This sign is representative of the vast majority of road signs in Delhi with four languages on them. The sign in the photograph in Figure 2 contains only two languages—Hindi and English.

These two signs can be used to generate discussions among students about the different socio-cultural aspects of language and its use in Delhi. Such a discussion could include the following pointers:

1. While it is understandable to have Hindi and English on the signs, why does the first photograph additionally have Urdu and Punjabi and why are these missing from the second one?

2. Who are the speakers of these languages? Are they linguistic minorities? Are there other languages, for example Bengali that should have been on the signs as well?

In order to answer the above questions, the class may need to think further about some more questions. These could be as follows:

1. Are there laws or policies that stipulate the use of Urdu and Punjabi on signs? Are these policies the result of a constitutional provision? Do the speakers of a language have a say in this?

2. Are these signs regulated by different departments of the government? Is the sign in the first photograph for example, within the jurisdiction of the Delhi government and the second one within the purview of the central government?

The above questions will lead to an engaging discussion on multilingualism, language policies, minority languages, constitutional provisions around languages, and so on. It is possible that the teacher may not have all the answers, which is fine. The goal is to have the class as a whole embark on a journey of exploration and discovery. Some answers will come forth more easily than others. But the critical thinking that this exercise will entail will become an advantage for the students for the rest of their lives.

Now I will discuss two examples of non-governmental commercial signs (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Photograph of a sign on a board in Zakir Nagar

Figure 4. Photograph of a sign on a shop in Vasant Vihar

The sign in Figure 3 taken from a clinic in Zakir Nagar, Delhi, has three languages, while the one in Figure 4, taken from a Vasant Vihar Mall has only English. In order to understand the differences between the two signs, the following questions can be used to generate a discussion.

1. How many languages does one see in the sign in figure 3 and how many in figure 4? Can you identify these languages?

2. Who are the potential customers for the medical clinic and for Tommy Hilfiger? Do they belong to a certain socio-economic class? Do these differences have anything to do with the language of the signs?

3. Are there any government policies that govern the use of languages in commercial signs?[6]

The instructor can lead the discussion, and help the class discover that languages convey meanings that are beyond the literal meanings of words. English, for example, conveys an upper middle class English speaking identity that Hindi does not (Gupta & Kapoor, 1991; Proctor, 2014). This is the reason that brands such as Tommy Hilfiger avoid the use of Hindi. The use of Urdu as well as Hindi on the clinic sign is motivated by the fact that while a large of

number of their customers in Zakir Nagar are likely to be Urdu speakers, there may be those who do not speak Urdu or English. Therefore the choice of language in the clinic sign is largely determined by the purpose of communication.

The last sets of signs I will discuss have been taken from private houses located in Zakir Nagar, New Delhi**.**

Figure 5. Photograph of a house sign in Zakir Nagar

Figure 6. Photograph of a house sign in Zakir Nagar

While the photograph in Figure 5 has both Urdu and English, the one in Figure 6 has only English. It is worth noting that both these pictures are from the same neighbourhood. Again, students can be encouraged to discuss the conclusions that can be drawn by looking at these two signs. It will emerge that people have a lot of freedom in deciding what language they would like to use on their house names. However this choice is not free from ideologies. The use of Urdu and Arabic in the first photograph and only English in the second is suggestive of the owners' ideologies around the differing social values Urdu and English represent in modern India.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that mundane public signs gathered from streets, markets, and malls can be used to teach linguistic diversity and a host of other socio-cultural aspects of language including policies that govern language use, symbolic values of language, multilingualism, language and representation, and minority languages. I have shown that the use of such materials collected by students and teachers together will not only help them develop an understanding of our language and linguistic diversity, but it will also create a student-centered learning environment that will develop critical thinking abilities among students.

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Endnotes

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[2] See for example the website www.bhojpuria.com. It has a whole section on literature in Bhojpuri in addition to an online English into Bhojpuri dictionary.

[3] See the National Curriculum Framework position paper on Language (2006) for a critical review of the Formula and principles of the teaching of Indian languages.

4 See Ahmad (2011) and Sharma (2001) for the loss of mother tongues among some minorities.

5 Language policies refer to both explicitly written documents as well as unwritten conventions regarding language use in public (Schiffman, 2006).

6 In Quebec, Canada, policies stipulate that French must be predominant on signs. Recently a company was fined because although their sign had French on top, the English and French lettering was of equal font size (Scott, 2015).

Rizwan Ahmad (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is currently Assistant Professor of Sociolinguistics at Qatar University. His research interests include language and identity, language in education, and orthography. He has published research papers in *Pragmatics*, *Language in Society*, and *Modern Asian Studies*.

rizwan.ahmad@qu.edu.qa