Elite interests, popular passions, and social power in the language politics of India

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Abstract

Movements for the recognition and official establishment of particular languages in India, among the many hundreds that have been identified and classified by linguists, grammarians, and census takers, have been prominent and recurring features of politics in the subcontinent for a century-and-a-half. These movements have invariably been competitive in character, demanding preference for one, and displacement of other, actual or potential rivals. Further, they have sometimes been associated with hostile and venomous characterizations of both a rival language and its speakers, leading to intercommunal/interethnic violence. Despite the turbulent history of such movements in modern India, viable compromises have been reached concerning the status of the multiplicity of Indian languages and their hierarchical ordering for various purposes. These compromises, however, have profound consequences for the life chances, including the empowerment and disempowerment, of all India's citizens. These consequences have only recently begun to attract scholarly attention.

Keywords: Politics; language movements; bilingualism; elites; interests; power.

The politics of language movements

Language movements and the politics of language are inherently and necessarily associated with the modern state and modern politics (Swaan 2001, p. 64; Arel 2002, p. 92). Before the rise of nationalism and language movements, rulers might make choices concerning the use of particular languages for official purposes, but any disagreements on the matter would not have involved a mass public. At the same time, *contra* Gellner, there is no necessary and inherent association between language and ethnicity (Washbrook 1982, p. 173). Nor does every modern state require, for administrative or other purposes, a single official language.

It is, nevertheless, the case that most modern states choose to have a single language for official purposes. It is also the case, in South Asia and elsewhere, that every choice regarding a single or multiple languages for official and/or educational purposes has consequences for the equalization or not, of life chances, and for the empowerment or disempowerment of speakers of different languages (Hobsbawm 1990, p. 110).[1]

Furthermore, language is not necessarily the primary form of ethnic affiliation or, to be more precise, it is not necessarily the central affiliation, symbol, or basis for the expression of political demands by, or on behalf of, particular social categories in multicultural, multilingual, or multireligious societies. On the contrary, as I argued in my *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* thirty years ago (Brass 1974), the politics of nationalism may be defined rather as the struggle – impossible ever to achieve completely – of establishing multi-symbol congruence within a constructed community. The nation-constructing process in multicultural societies always begins with a single central symbol, which may be either language or religion or colour or any other cultural or ethnic marker, whichever serves simultaneously to separate one group from another and is at the same time politically convenient.

That is to say that, in such societies, especially where there is considerable bilingualism, either at the elite level or at the mass level, the ethnic symbol that comes into play depends primarily on the categories recognized by the state and by elite conflicts for political power within those state-recognized categories. Thus, before Independence in India, the British provided political opportunities to religiously defined groups: Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in particular. In consequence, language politics and language movements, in north India above all, took second place – though they developed simultaneously alongside – politicized religious movements. In the post-Independence period, however, when it became taboo for groups to express their demands for political recognition on the basis of religion, language movements flourished and, in several cases, displaced religious identifications for political purposes. While it is true that the displacement of religious identification by language was merely a political ruse in the case, for example, of the Sikhs in Punjab, at the same time, for Hindus in Punjab, it involved a real generational change in the primary spoken language from Punjabi to Hindi.

Yet a further example of the subordination of language to religious communal identification concerns the historic recognition of one form of Hindi, known as *Khari Boli*, as the regional standard language of northern India, and ultimately as the official language of the country, which has also involved the absorption of a multiplicity of local languages, dialects, mother tongues, whatever one wants to call them. It is in part a consequence of elite competition from 'the then underprivileged Hindu majority' (Shackle and Snell 1990, p. 7) with the

Urdu-speaking and Urdu-writing privileged classes of northern India, whose tongue and script, it was said, were foreign and Muslim, that Hindi devotees have succeeded in this process of absorption and displacement of all other alternatives in that part of the country. At the same time, in the nineteenth century, a similar process of absorption and displacement of local dialects and languages by standardized Urdu was promoted by Muslim religious elites in the famous Deoband school located in western Uttar Pradesh [U.P.], and its affiliated institutions spread widely across north India and beyond to other parts of the subcontinent (Metcalf 1982, p. 209). But, the political conflict that led to Muslim separatism did not arise from this institution and its associated political-cultural organization, the Jami'at-I 'Ulama'-yi Hind, which remained staunchly pro-Congress throughout the twentieth century and opposed Muslim political separatism and the Pakistan movement. The latter movement, rather, found its support in another Muslim educational institution, the Aligarh Muslim University, also located in western U.P. Though its curriculum included Muslim and Urdu studies, the elites who founded it, as well as its students, came from entirely different backgrounds from those who founded and attended Deoband. They came primarily from upper class Muslim families of landlords and government servants, in search of government jobs (Metcalf, pp. 327–28), for whom the defence of Urdu against the claims of Hindi served the purpose of maintaining their privileged access to those jobs.[2]

The Hindi-Urdu conflict in north India was tinged with Hindu-Muslim difference from the beginning, and gradually and increasingly became saturated with Hindu-Muslim competition and animosity that ultimately led to the political divergence, which culminated in the Muslim separatist movement, the partition of India, and the creation of Pakistan. The religious basis of the Hindi movement was clear enough by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It was centred in the Hindu holy city of Banaras, where both the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, the pre-eminent organization for the Hindi movement, and the Banaras Hindu University [BHU], were located. A central figure in both movements was Madan Mohan Malaviya, who was actually a native of the city of Allahabad, but who took the lead in the establishment of the BHU in Banaras and was its vice-chancellor for twenty years, from 1919 to 1939. The curriculum he wished to see established there was to emphasize Sanskrit and classical Hindu religious, legal, and philosophical texts as well as the native languages of India, with Hindi as the medium of instruction. However, owing to the insistence of the British rulers, English became the primary medium of instruction. Malaviya himself, however, had greater success earlier, in his campaign to promote the adoption of the Hindi language as a language of state administration and primary education in the N.W.P. (now Uttar Pradesh), coequal with

Urdu; the campaign achieved its goal in 1900. He was also deeply involved in Hindu movements of religious purification. The Hindi language that men like Malaviya wished to promote was also to be purified through the displacement of Persian-Arabic vocabulary by direct and indirect borrowings from Sanskrit (Casolari 2002) and the Persian-Arabic script by the Devanagari.

But there has been a profound difference in identity choices between the northern Hindi-Urdu speaking provinces, now states, of India, on the one hand, and the southern states especially. In the former, where the primary line of elite competition was between privileged Muslim and rising Hindu elites, religion was the primary symbol of political identity – and remains so today – and displaced potential language/dialect conflicts that were overridden by a politicoreligious identity. The extent of displacement or subordination of such subsidiary languages and dialects to Hindi may be discerned even now, in the 1991 census, where, under the heading of Hindi, forty-eight 'languages and mother tongues' are subsumed, along with an unspecified number of 'others'(Census of India 1999a, p. 3). While some of these languages and mother tongues are spurious, merely alternative, local names of various mutually intelligible dialects, others are well known, widely spread, long recognized (especially since the great linguist, George Grierson identified them in his massive, multi-volume *Linguistic Survey of India*, published at the turn of the twentieth century), and numerically quite large. For example, Bhojpuri, the largest, with 23,102,050 speakers has a larger number of speakers than seven of the nineteen Scheduled Languages,[3] including languages such as Assamese, which is the official language of the state of Assam. It has nearly the same number of speakers as Punjabi, which is also an official state language, of Punjab. There are several other mother tongues subsumed under Hindi, which outnumber several of the Scheduled Languages.

In the south, on the other hand, where upper caste Hindu elites were dominant – particularly the Brahman castes identified with the historic Sanskritic culture of Indian civilization – rising middle castes challenged their dominance through the medium and vehicle of the vernacular languages alone. In the north, Muslims and their form of Hindi-Urdu were characterized as foreign; in the south, it was Brahmanic, Sanskritic culture that was so defined.

The politics of language in India display another feature that contradicts any attempt to claim an overriding primacy of language loyalty and identification against other languages when life chances are involved. This feature operates primarily at the elite level in the non-Hindi-speaking areas of the country where highly educated persons choose English as their language of communication outside home and family – and sometimes even there as well – to enhance their job opportunities in higher administration, global corporations, international institutions,

and colleges and universities abroad. This kind of choice in favour of English, of course, is nowadays hardly confined to Indian regional language speakers, but is frequently made at both elite and intermediate social levels throughout the world.[4]

Bilingualism and elite language choice

But there is one characteristic of elite language choice in India that is not shared with the rest of the world, which arises from the simultaneous existence of two alternative official languages for the country as a whole, while the vast majority of the people speak either only their regional language or some combination of a local 'mother tongue' and the regional language. That presents a situation of a double displacement, separating elite and mass levels of language use and life opportunities. Educated Hindi-speakers, especially if they know enough English as well, can compete successfully with non-Hindi-region English language speakers for the highest posts in the central government (though not in the foreign and global corporations and institutions unless they have easy fluency in English), leaving the higher-level provincial government jobs in the Hindi-speaking states to less educated Hindi-speakers, and the middle and lowest-level jobs to those who have had either limited advanced educational opportunities or none at all. With regard to the latter, it is important to recognize that effective literacy in most of the Hindi-speaking region is probably still below 50 per cent (even though the official figures for 1991 declared 52.2 per cent total literacy).[5] Those people who are illiterate in Hindi are frequently also bilingual in their mother tongue and Hindi, but lack even the limited opportunities available to the intermediate and lower social categories in the non-Hindi-speaking states where literacy rates are much higher. It is, of course, also true that the vast majority of women in India are illiterate, though women who have higher education in English, chiefly, and Hindi, to some extent, have opportunities available to them that are quite lacking for most men, who have only an intermediate, lower level, or no education.[6]

Thus, a first take, as it were, on the relationship between possible language choices and life chances in India presents us with three broad levels: 1) higher level elite speakers of either English or Hindi; 2) intermediate level elite speakers of Hindi only, or a regional language; 3) lower level non-elite, poorly educated or even illiterate speakers of a regional language and/or a local 'mother tongue.'[7] At the upper levels, however, as Swaan has noted, those who are bilingual play critical mediating roles (Swaan 2001, pp. 67–8 and elsewhere). This was the case in the colonial period; it is also the case today. Bilinguals are also likely to rise to the highest political and administrative positions available at each level: central, regional, or local. They are also likely as well to want to preserve the status of the languages in which they are fluent, to promote

those which offer possibilities of advancement for themselves, and to be uninterested in advancing universal literacy in the country. So, in India, English has been supported for advanced education most strongly in the non-Hindi-speaking states in order to equalize the life chances of the regional elites against the elites from the Hindi-speaking regions.

Among the non-Hindi-speaking states, Tamil Nadu has gone the furthest in virtually banning the Hindi language from the curriculum and offering instruction in only two languages at the primary and secondary levels: Tamil (or other 'mother tongues' spoken in the state) and English. As a consequence of both relatively high literacy rates in the state and one of the highest levels of bi- and trilingualism in English in the country (above 14 per cent) (Census of India 1999b, p. 11), elites from Tamil Nadu have retained a very strong competitive advantage for access to jobs in the central government, global corporations, and, increasingly, in international educational institutions. It remains true, however, that, even in Tamil Nadu, English, 'the former colonial language,' has not become 'a language of mass instruction' (Swaan 2001, pp. 67–8). The vast majority of Tamil speakers in Tamil Nadu are monolingual.

Further, English remains a principal second language for bilinguals in virtually every state in the Indian Union. Not only that, the number of speakers of English as second or third language listed in the 1991 Indian census figures is 90,042,487, outnumbering the number of speakers of Hindi as second or third language (70,744,505) by approximately 20 million (Census of India 1999b, pp. 11–12). However, the figure for English bi- and trilinguals includes those with Hindi as the first language. After deducting their number from the total, we get a figure of 60,184,313 non-Hindi-speakers who know English and a figure of 29,858,174 Hindi-speakers who know English, providing perhaps a clearer picture of the actual competitive situation between persons from the Hindi-speaking and the non-Hindi-speaking areas. I say perhaps because these figures, which rely entirely on respondent statements, do not specify the degree of knowledge of English (or Hindi) required for the status of bilingual or trilingual. Nor can they be easily correlated with literacy since language figures are provided by the number of speakers in the country as a whole, and literacy figures are provided only by state.[8] Nevertheless, I am confident in saying that, insofar as the elite positions available to Indians at the national and international level are concerned, the competitive advantage for English-knowing bilinguals and trilinguals is certain and, therefore, that non-Hindi-speakers in that category have a competitive advantage at the topmost levels in comparison with the smaller numbers of English-knowing bilinguals and trilinguals from the Hindi-speaking pool. At the highest level, therefore, we can say with assurance that English bilinguals – those at least who also have a higher education – maintain what Swaan calls a 'mediation monopoly' for 'an educated minority' in the country (Swaan 2001, pp. 67–8),[9] who

constitute, in effect, the ruling elite of India or, in Gaetano Mosca's terminology, the ruling class from which the ruling elites are drawn. It is from this class, too, that 'a modernised techno-managerial elite' has been produced, whose members fill nearly all the highest positions in the Indian Administrative Service and the managerial positions in the global corporations and international institutions operating in India.[10]

Table 1 illustrates further aspects of the bilingual choices[11] made by the speakers of scheduled languages in India. The table lists in rank order, in the second column, the proportion of persons bilingual in at least one of the two official languages, English or Hindi, in fifteen scheduled languages, excluding Hindi, as well as Kashmiri (where data could not be collected for the 1991 census), and Sanskrit (which is more a cultural symbol than language of communication). The first thing to note is that four of the five highest-ranked languages, namely, Sindhi, Konkani, Manipuri,[12] and Nepali are not official languages in any state and, therefore, do not have a competitive advantage for state public sector employment in any state in India. So, in order to compete for public sector posts at both the state and central government level, it is crucial that they have competence in at least one of the official languages of India or of the Hindi-speaking states in which they reside.

The second noteworthy aspect of the figures is the high proportion of

Table 1. *Percentage of (Scheduled Language) speakers, with English and/or Hindi as second or third language[1]*

Language	English or Hindi (percentage)	English only (percentage)	Hindi only (percentage)
Sindhi	70.10	19.45	50.65
Punjabi	59.97	23.72	36.25
Konkani	59.90	34.85	25.04
Manipuri	50.58	26.27	24.31
Nepali	43.66	8.20	35.46
Malayalam	43.41	24.35	19.07
Marathi	37.89	12.10	25.79
Gujarati	34.51	10.60	23.91
Assamese	31.15	14.22	16.93
Urdu	28.47	7.86	20.61
Oriya	24.03	12.66	11.37
Kannada	20.95	11.98	8.97
Telugu	19.11	11.10	8.01
Bengali	15.67	9.04	6.64
Tamil	15.61	14.05	1.56
Hindi	8.85	8.85	NA

Correlation coefficient for columns 3 and 4 = .32.
[1]Excluding Kashmiri, for which census data are incomplete, and Sanskrit, whose numbers are very low and somewhat spurious.

bilinguals in one or other of the official languages in states adjacent to or close to the Hindi-speaking region, where Hindi has spread widely. These languages, which are official languages in such states, are, in rank order, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, and Assamese. The anomaly in the rank is Malayalam, a deep southern state, second only to Punjabi in bilingual speakers of at least one of the two official languages.

The third feature of the figures concerns Urdu, which comes next in the rank order of languages, but even so is certainly too low, since virtually all Urdu-speakers outside of the state of Andhra Pradesh – and probably even there as well – are, in effect, Hindi-speakers, though the census does not take note of that and merely records what respondents state.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that all the southern languages, except Malayalam, and the two eastern languages, Oriya and Bengali, rank at the bottom in knowledge of one or more of the two official languages. This ranking constitutes, in reverse order, a more or less deliberate rejection of Hindi as a cultural language and a preference for English only, for practical purposes, with Tamil leading this group, Bengali second, the other two large south Indian languages, Telugu and Kannada, coming next, and finally Oriya.

Columns 3 and 4 reveal the distinctive second language choices, between Hindi and English, made by speakers of the scheduled languages. That they are distinctive is indicated by the correlation coefficient between the percentage choosing English and the percentage choosing Hindi as second language, which is positive at .32, but with a low significance level (.250). Hindi is the preferred second language choice for speakers of Sindhi, Punjabi, Nepali, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu, and Assamese (only slightly). English is the preferred second language choice for Konkani, Manipuri (slightly), Malayalam, Tamil, Oriya, Kannada, Telugu, and Bengali speakers, confirming once again the division between the northern and western languages, on the one hand, and the southern and eastern languages, on the other hand, with the northern and western language speakers preferring Hindi, the southern and eastern English. As for the more marginal languages, with no state recognizing their language as official, their speakers opt either for Hindi primarily or for both (that is, with the numbers of persons choosing Hindi or English in similar proportions). Finally, Hindi-speakers rank close to the bottom in choice of English as a second language, for the obvious reason that they retain a competitive advantage through Hindi alone, though, as just stated, proficient English speakers continue to have the edge at the top.

Elites and language movements

In their initial and developing stages, language movements are every-where vehicles for the pursuit of economic advancement, social status,

and political power by specific elites. The dialect/language chosen, as well as its form and style, constitute political as well as 'linguistic acts', in which the type of linguistic act chosen arises from different 'social conditions' (Annamalai 1989, p. 226). In other words, different elites in different social and political circumstances may choose a borrowing strategy or a purification strategy, depending on the political and economic goals they choose and whether or not they wish to identify with or distance themselves from another group.

In multilingual societies such as India, which also encompass a multiplicity of 'mother tongues,' bilingualism, as we have just seen, is widespread, but it is of two types. At the mass level, as already noted, most people, in addition to their own mother tongue, speak – with varying degrees of fluency – broader languages of communication, bazaar Hindi-Urdu in northern India or, nowadays, the Hindi regional standard language. At the elite level, bilingualism – which may also be trilingualism – includes knowledge of both a regional standard native language and a broader language of interregional and/or international communication. In India, again as said above, that language is, of course, English and/or for well-educated Hindi-speakers, Hinglish—that wonderful language that combines English and Hindi noun and verb forms in a single sentence. It is important to note that elite bilingualism arises, in the first instance, and has always arisen, among those persons who already occupy an elite position in their society. Everywhere in India in the colonial period, such elites maintained and enhanced their status by acquiring English, just as they had earlier acquired Persian. Moreover, at the same time that they acquired the language of rule under the British, they sought also to standardize and modernize their own languages to make them fit vehicles for literature and for creating a speech community.[13] By doing so, these elites also placed themselves in what Swaan characterizes as a mediating position, in which they could communicate effectively with the rulers, acquire positions of influence and power in government administration, and build a constituency among their own language speakers on whose behalf they might then make a claim to speak and, thereby, to enhance further their own political influence.

In such multilingual environments, a dual movement takes place. On the one hand, elites promoting a particular dialect to the status of a regional standard seek to enlarge, or even create, a new speech community through the medium of a regional or national standard language that simultaneously displaces some, and encompasses other dialects. On the other hand, elite competition may then develop, which takes the striking form of establishing and maintaining barriers of communication (Brass 1974, p. 423; Annamalai 1989, p. 229) between groups differently defined, who may in fact speak more or less the same language. We think of these two processes as language standardization and language purification. Once again, the Hindi-Urdu controversy provides an example of both:

standardization of Hindi to encompass as many as possible of the dialects and mother tongues of northern and western India, combined with linguistic purification through Sanskritization, and insistence on the use of the Devanagari script to impose a symbolic barrier to communication between Hindus and Muslims, which does not exist in fact. However, that process has culminated in north India, especially in the state of Uttar Pradesh [U.P.], in a drastic decline in the prevalence of the Urdu written and spoken forms of the traditional north Indian language of wider communication (See, for example, Farouqui 1995; Latifi 1999; Pant 2002). This has meant that most Muslims who go to government schools in northern India do not learn and cannot read the Persian-Arabic script. But, this process of including Muslim children in the newly formed Hindi speech community has not done away with the symbolic, politicoreligious barrier between Hindus and Muslims in north India, which has intensified in the last two decades more than ever, taking the form of increasingly vicious Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms.[14]

It is another anomaly, moreover, that, according to the 1991 census, identification of Muslims with the Urdu language is higher in many states where Urdu has not traditionally been the language of Muslims than it is in states where that has traditionally been the case. (See Table 2.) Thus, the correspondence between the number of Urdu speakers and the Muslim population is closer in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Karnataka, and Maharashtra than it is in the northern states of Bihar, U. P., Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana. In Andhra, a form of Urdu has been the language of Muslims and, in the Bombay metropolis of Maharashtra, there are many Urdu-speakers who have migrated from the north, but Oriya has traditionally been the language of Muslims in Orissa and Kannada the language of Muslims in Karnataka.[15] The point here, though, is simply that, once again, language and ethnic or religious identifications vary according to many factors, among which 'mother tongue' is only one. In India, those other factors are social and economic opportunities provided by different language choices, government discrimination or acceptance, and intensity of communal religious conflict (which can either strengthen or weaken linguistic identification).

Yet a further example of the subordination of linguistic/vernacular/mother tongue identifications to alternative languages, for both political reasons and for the enhancement of life chances, comes from one of the most hotly and dangerously contested regions of the world, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Here the spoken, everyday language of the majority of the people is Kashmiri. However, 'Urdu and English are the languages of teaching and official use in Kashmir' (Kishwar 1998, p. 279). Further, whereas the 1981 census figures list Kashmiri and Dogri as the two most widely spoken languages in the state (comprising 52.29 per cent and 24.39 per cent of the population, respectively), the three-language formula for language instruction in the primary and secondary schools

Table 2. *Ratio of Urdu-speakers to the Muslim population for 15 major states, 1991*

State	Percentage of Urdu-speakers to Muslim population	Muslim population (rank)		Percentage of Muslims to total population (rank)	Percentage of Urdu-speakers to total population	Number of Urdu-speakers
Andhra Pradesh	93.86	5,923,954	(7)	8.91 (8)	8.36	5,560,154
Orissa	86.90	577,775	(14)	1.83 (14)	1.59	502,102
Karnataka	85.59	5,234,023	(8)	11.64 (6)	9.94	4,480,038
Maharashtra	75.17	7,628,755	(4)	9.67 (7)	7.23	5,734,468
Bihar	66.80	12,787,985	(3)	14.81 (5)	9.89	8,542,463
UP	51.82	24,109,684	(1)	17.33 (4)	8.98	12,492,927
Madhya Pradesh	37.40	3,282,800	(11)	4.96 (12)	1.85	1,227,672
Haryana	34.28	763,775	(13)	4.64 (13)	1.59	261,820
Tamil Nadu	33.96	3,052,717	(12)	5.47 (11)	1.86	1,036,660
Rajasthan	27.05	3,525,339	(10)	8.01 (10)	2.16	953,497
Gujarat	15.19	3,606,920	(9)	8.73 (9)	1.32	547,737
West Bengal	9.05	16,075,836	(2)	23.61 (2)	2.65	1,455,649
Punjab	5.60	239,401	(15)	1.18 (15)	0.07	13,416
Kerala	0.19	6,788,364	(5)	23.33 (3)	0.04	12,625
Assam	0.06	6,373,204	(6)	28.43 (1)	0.02	3,900
TOTAL[a]	42.15	101,596,057		12.12	5.18	42,825,128

Sources. Compiled from Census of India, 1991, Series–1: INDIA, Paper 1 of 1995: Religion, by M.Vijayanunni and Series 1—India: Part IV B(i)(a)–C Series: Language, Table C–7, India, States and Union Territories, by M. Vijayanunni, Statement 9.
[a]Figures in this row are not column totals, but are for the entire country.

of the state includes only Urdu, Hindi, and English (India 1995).[16] In this case, Urdu serves a dual purpose as the marker of Muslim identity while being, for practical purposes of communication outside of Kashmir, identical to Hindi. Some of the regional nationalist and separatist leaders and movements in Kashmir have adopted the slogan of 'Kashmiriyat', arguing for unity between Muslims and Hindus on the basis of the Kashmiri language and the distinctive culture of the region. However, it would appear that education in the mother tongues of the people in Kashmir has been subordinated to both Hindi-Urdu and English, thereby enabling educated Kashmiris to compete from a potentially more favourable position than regional elites in some of the other non-Hindi-speaking states for access to high status jobs outside their state.

   Equally interesting and notable is the situation that Ramaswamy describes in the multilingual south Indian province of Madras in the 1920s and 1930s (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 175). At a time when Hindu-Muslim political differences over representation and language identifications had become consolidated in north India, Muslims in Madras province were divided between Tamil-speaking Muslims, on the one hand, who aligned with a backward caste movement that was challenging the dominance of both 'Hinduism and Brahmanism' in economic, social and political life, and the Urdu-speaking elite, on the other hand, dominant among Muslims in the province. A further twist in this situation was the support given by the latter to Hindustani, that is, to the idea that Hindi and Urdu were basically the same language written in two different scripts. This state of affairs sounds rather complicated, but the principal point is that language identifications depend both upon perceived life chances offered by particular language choices and, equally important, and connected to the question of life chances, upon patterns of elite political competition for power.

Popular passions and elite interests in the politics of language: Mother's milk, bottled milk, and linguistic narcissism

In any discussion of the political and economic interests that underlie all language movements and that, as I have argued, often lead people to discard their language for another, even to disown their own language in order to separate themselves clearly from another group who speak the same language, someone always asks the question: how then do you explain the attachment that most people feel towards their language, the passion that it arouses, and the willingness of some people to die in defence of their language in language movements? My initial response to this set of questions is that it is not at all clear to me that most people are so attached to their language, that their attachment is passionate, and that it may move some among them to die in its cause. It appears to me rather that such attachments, passions, and commitments also arise only

under specific conditions, that they are often a mask behind which other interests lie, and that the passionate attachment is not to the language but to the self.

It is perhaps difficult for an English speaker to empathize with such claimed feelings of passion for one's own language, for it is increasingly rare for us to be in situations where we cannot somehow manage to be understood and to get what we want. When we cannot, our feelings are likely to be a sense of frustration, of deficiency, of isolation, but not a feeling of love for our own language. If the situation is prolonged, then, of course, one must strive to learn another tongue, which so many millions of immigrants to America have done successfully during the past two centuries. In either case, whether temporary or permanent, it is one's sense of self that is at stake, one's self-respect, one's sense of importance, the loss of the sense of centrality of one's person in a world of communication.

When a person says, 'I love my language,' what is meant is, 'I love myself,' a statement that cannot be uttered aloud in society. One may argue in a rational or emotional way about whether French or Bengali is the most beautiful and expressive language in the world, German or Arabic the most unpleasantly guttural, English the most versatile and comprehensive, Yiddish the funniest, etceteras.[17] But this is an aesthetic question, not a question of passionate attachment, no matter how passionate one may get over the matter. Rather, the more passionate one gets about such a matter, the more there are grounds for suspicion that the terms used to describe one's own language, and that of another, reflect narcissism with regard to oneself and one's group and repulsion with regard to the other. In a word, this love of one's language is a form of displacement of narcissism of the self onto the language, and of derision and disregard on to the language of the other.[18]

What is involved here is metaphorical displacement as well, through the use of the language of the body and of the mother and of the mother's body, to stand in for the self and the group. Moreover, it smacks of a kind of infantilism as well. While it is common enough for such metaphorical imagery to be used in many cultures, it appears to me to be impossible to judge the authenticity of the feelings expressed through such imagery. What can it possibly mean when an adult, such as one Crystal cites, whose language is dying out, says that he feels that he has 'drunk the milk of a strange woman', that he 'grew up alongside another person', that he feels like this because he does 'not speak [his] mother's language' (Crystal 2000, p. 24)? How is it possible that he cannot speak to his mother in her language? What kind of love for his mother can it be that has terminated effective and affective communication with her?

But then it is probably more often the case that one defends one's mother tongue when one cannot speak at all or well a language of wider communication when one's own language is dying out or is useless for

improving one's life chances. In such a situation, the use of the mother tongue metaphor must mean that one has lost one's mother's protection and that the speaker feels like a child, isolated in a world of adults who speak another language. There are only two adult responses to such a situation: learn to speak the other language or join a movement to protect and promote one's own and, thereby, protect and promote one's social, economic, and political standing and interests.

Many such movements have been founded, using the infantile and narcissistic metaphors of mother tongue and mother's milk. This 'talk of mother-tongue and mother's milk', is, as Pollock notes, the talk 'of language and blood' (Pollock 2000, p. 596) of separation and difference, of self-glorification and other-disparagement. Like the languages of blood, race, and religious identification, it is a language of political mobilization and separation. In the case of the Tamil language movement of the past century and more, the Tamil language became the central symbol of Tamil regional nationalism, overriding all other 'alternative selves, contrary allegiances, and prior commitments.' Thus, in complete contrast to the north Indian case of Hindi and Urdu, where religiopolitical identification overrode language identification by absorbing a multiplicity of language/dialects/mother tongues, the Tamil movement was religiously inclusive, absorbing Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, as long as they acknowledged Tamil as their mother tongue (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 252). The disparaged other was the Brahman, dubbed as foreign, Aryan rather than Dravidian in origin. That the Tamil movement has not led to riotous violence against and killing of Brahmans probably reflects more the fact that, though privileged, Tamil Brahmans were relatively small in number, more easily displaced from political power than the Muslims of north India, and were not associated with powerful countermovements such as led to Muslim separatism in north India, the partition of the country in 1947, and a consequent wellspring of resentment against Muslims that has persisted to the present day.

Moreover, consistent with my argument above, this identification of one's language with one's mother, which has gone in the Tamil case to the utmost extreme of creation of a new mother goddess of the Tamil language in the pantheon of deities, this identification has to be instilled. It is not innate, it is not acquired from suckling at the mother's breast or at the milk bottle: to recall the exchange between Joshua Fishman and Ernest Gellner in Seattle over a quarter century ago.[19] All linguistic claims to the contrary notwithstanding concerning mutual comprehensibility or its absence, linguists cannot definitively mark the boundaries between languages and dialects, at least in a way that will put an end to politically arbitrary decisions on the matter. On the contrary, it is not mutual comprehensibility that has led to the absorption of 15 or 20 or 48 north Indian languages/dialects by Hindi,[20] but the movement, begun in

the nineteenth century, to establish the supremacy of the Hindi language through standardization of the *Khari/Boli* variant. This movement led also to the demotion of various regional and local languages/dialects to inferior status, a process intensified and partly inspired by Hindu-Muslim difference and the opposing movement to maintain the previous supremacy of Urdu. Nor is it mutual incomprehensibility that led to 'the sudden emergence in 1961 of millions of speakers of Maithili, Magahi, and Bhojpuri, all grouped by the census as dialects of Bihari, in districts that were previously almost solidly Hindi-speaking', as Schwartzberg (1985, p. 170) has put it. But the point is they were not 'almost solidly Hindi-speaking'. True, knowledge of standardized Hindi had certainly increased somewhat in these areas. But, it was a political decision that led to the re-emergence of these languages, recognized a half-century earlier by Grierson in his great *Linguistic Survey of India*. These languages have since then once again disappeared from or been marginalized in the Indian censuses, or listed as merely mother tongues included in Hindi, because they have failed to develop sustained political movements on their behalf.

Similar recognition and derecognition, classification and reclassification of the languages of India has taken place in other states in India and in the Indian census as a whole (Schwartzberg 1985, pp. 180–1). Thus, the 1971 census listed 1,652 mother tongues from Abhalaik to Zunwar (each of which had only one claimed speaker), in four language families and 30 or 32 language 'groups'. The 1991 census, however, has simplified matters with a new classification of Indian languages into eighteen 'scheduled' languages – those recognized on the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution – and ninety-six named non-scheduled languages plus one category of 'other languages' not named. Even this reduced list contains some remarkable names, such as 'Kisan', which means peasant in Hindi, listed in the 1971 census under 'mother tongue with unspecified family affiliation', along with English for some reason. The number of speakers of 'Kisan' has increased, according to the census volumes, from 50,378 to 162,088.[21]

I should like to say at this point that I do not want to be misunderstood. I believe that the only fair and honest census of languages is one that accepts what the respondent says and notes it down. My point is simply this: the decisions concerning grouping, classification, recognition, are ultimately political decisions, not scientific linguistic ones. Nor are they based on the greatness of a language's literary tradition, its subtlety or richness or expressiveness. Nor can they be maintained by self-love or mother-love in the absence of a political movement on their behalf. Nor will it improve the life chances of speakers of what Crystal calls 'endangered languages' to set out to preserve them.

Vernacular empowerment, and disempowerment

I want to conclude by outlining a preliminary schemata of the movement, in the competition between elite and non-elite groups and languages, from powerlessness to power, from being disempowered to being empowered, and the threat of a reverse movement as well. The movement will follow a different course depending upon where the group is placed at any chosen starting point. For the powerless, the movement is as follows:

> Lower-level elite (writers, teachers, lower rung bureaucrats) promotion of the vernacular, inculcating > linguistic narcissism, creating > a movement for self-respect, and > group recognition, > identifying the language of the dominant as alien, enslaving, and (sometimes) corrupt, leading to >language purification, and > official recognition of the vernacular, displacement of the alien, enslaving language, and empowerment of the formerly powerless

The movement in the other direction may be encapsulated as follows:

> Dominant elite defence of the language of rule as the most fit instrument for communication and modernity and as the repository of the glories of the people's high culture > disparagement of the vernaculars as unfit and uncouth > acceptance of the vernaculars as fit only for primary and secondary education, good enough for the masses, for whom education in the elite language will remain unattainable > continued use of the elite language at the highest official levels, against all competitors > and retention of the power of the upper class, upper caste users in government and/or in the global network of intellectual and corporate power

These schemata, of course, are only that, and numerous variations in detail occur in practice, most especially, as in the north Indian case, where there have been competing vernaculars as well as competing elite languages. Moreover, the competitive movements may, as in the Indian case, result in compromises. But the compromises also need to be evaluated with regard to the relations of power that are sanctified through them. For now, I can do no more than provide some examples of how the processes outlined have developed in India, how they have come in conflict, and how they have been resolved.

Examples: The origins of the Hindi-Urdu controversy in north India lay in the initial encouragement in the 1860s of two alternative media of education in the primary and secondary schools, Hindi and Urdu, which then produced 'vernacular elites' educated primarily 'in Hindi or Urdu and looking to government service for their livelihoods' (King 1992, p. 124).

The dominant elites in U.P. were Urdu-speaking and Urdu-writing (Brass 1974, ch. iii; Robinson 1975, pp. 33–4);[22] their position was gradually challenged by the new Hindi-speaking, Devanagari-writing elites, culminating in the achievement in 1900 of official recognition for the latter, along with Urdu, in the courts and primary and secondary schools. It is important to note that the situation in north India was entirely different from that in other regions such as Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, where the issue was primarily one of standardizing a single vernacular language, Bengali or Marathi.[23] Moreover, in these regions, particularly Tamil Nadu, a second issue was the separation between high and low versions of the language, that is, the issue of diglossia. Forms of diglossia have arisen in all major language regions of India, but Tamil is generally used as the classic example in South Asia.[24] Diglossia also, of course, is an issue that involves elite-mass differentiations.

In all cases, however, the inculcation of linguistic narcissism is prominent, as well as the identification of the vernacular language with the mother. In the north, in addition, disparagement of the competing vernacular and, of the other 'mother' as well, is intense. Thus, in the examples given by King from nineteenth century Hindi plays, Persian is described as the mother of Urdu, whose women are prostitutes.[25] India itself has become identified, among Hindu revivalists in the northern, Hindi-speaking region with the mother, Bharat Mata (van der Veer 1987, p. 293), who has been elevated to the status of a Hindu deity, which has been 'taken out in procession and worshipped by hundreds of thousands of people' in militant Hindu-sponsored movements of popular mobilization (Malik and Vajpeyi 1989, p. 315). In fact, there is a mother trinity comprising 'Mother India, Mother Ganga and Mother Cow' (Navlakha 1989, p. 658).

And, in Tamil Nadu, the Tamil language is represented by the newly created goddess, *Tamilttay*, figure of womanly virtue, 'benevolent mother and pure virgin' (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 80) whose body is threatened with violation by those opposed to the Tamil language, who do not share the devotion that has been and continues to be required for its preservation and advancement (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 84), especially against Hindi (Udayar, in Bhaktavatsalam 1978, p. 4). The threat of violation of its women, a trope that also appears continuously in the northern Hindu-Muslim discourse of animosity, is a threat to the community, to dishonour the group as a whole, the Hindu community or the Tamil speech community (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 112). Ramaswamy also notes, like Pollock, that the language of 'motherhood' in the Tamil devotional movement is also the language of 'shared blood' (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 63). What transpires in this Tamil narrative of linguistic devotion is, as Ramaswamy has described it, a situation in which the 'self merges into the imagined self of Tamil, whose life experiences are subordinated to the superior cause of the language' (Ramaswamy, pp. 182–3), that is, to the group.

The dishonouring of the mother and the group implies a threat to the purity of the group, to its very being and identity, which requires, therefore, purification (Annamalai 1989, p. 230), that is to say, removal of the impurities that have arisen as a consequence of previous and present contacts with alien, enslaving others: Muslims or Brahmans, the Urdu language or Sanskrit or English. In its mildest form, in language movements of purification, it is a matter of removing words identified with an alien language and disallowing further borrowings.[26] In its most extreme form, it may involve removal of the other persons through violence, justified as retaliatory against the alleged depredations of the other. It may also require self-sacrifice in defence of the language, the religion, the community. What is involved in all cases, limited or extreme, is a search for dignity and self-respect for oneself through identification with the group and the community and the elevation of its symbols of identity. That demand for self-respect, however, does not in all cases call for 'respectful acceptance' (Fishman 1980, p. 95) of other groups. Indeed, it commonly works in quite the opposite way, as the Indian examples – and many others in other parts of the world – have amply demonstrated.[27]

The most one can say is that there are benign and malignant forms of the search for self-respect through group identity, but that all such movements have the potential for disparagement of, and violence towards, the other. It is, therefore, necessary to acknowledge that such movements may be required in order to change 'relations of power, authority and control between Self and the Other' (Jernudd 1989, p. 1). Once the power relations have been altered, however, the dichotomization that has been created may yet persist in the form of scapegoating when the rising group finds that its aspirations are still blocked. Such is the case in contemporary India where Muslim privileges were ended a half century ago, where Hindi is the official language of the country, but where India itself and its leaders have little respect in the world of nations. Suffering from widespread feelings of *ressentiment* against the West, whose level of economic growth and well-being they have not been able to approach, militant Hindus find the source of their problems in the Muslims, whom they continue to describe as 'pampered', to discriminate against their language and script, and to produce anti-Muslim riots and pogroms in numerous cities and towns, especially in the northern and western parts of the country (Brass 2003).

Insofar as India as a whole is concerned, however, language is not now at the centre of the group conflict and violence that are endemic. On the contrary, from the point of view of 'national integration', the resolution of the language issues has been a success story in several respects. First, the country has been divided into federal units in almost all of which there is a single dominant, official language of education and administration. Second, a viable compromise has been reached between advocates of Hindi and those who opposed its adoption as official language of the

country through the simultaneous retention of English as an additional official language. Third, partly as a result, competition among the upper tier elites for power and economic advantage has been equalized in the country as a whole.

From the point of view of empowerment and disempowerment, however, the interlinguistic balance that prevails in India rests upon a base of mass illiteracy in most languages and a consequent demarcation of opportunities for power, as well as dignity and economic advancement, into the three broad tiers outlined earlier: the upper elite tier of the bilinguals, who are proficient in English or Hindi, especially the former; the intermediate tier of educated speakers of a dominant regional language only; and the lower tier of poorly educated or illiterate monolinguals or bilinguals in regional and/or local languages/dialects/mother tongues. A worthwhile task for future research on language and power in contemporary India would be to collect systematic data on the relationship between linguistic capabilities and employment in selected sectors of the Indian polity and economy, on the one hand, and linguistic capabilities and advancement in politics, on the other hand.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   For South Asia, however, Ghosh (2002) has argued, in an article on the rise of literary Bengali in nineteenth-century Bengal, that such consequences nevertheless left room for 'different sections of the Bengali middle classes to voice their distinctive concerns.' While this is an important argument on a neglected aspect of research on language politics in India, it does not appear to me to contradict the fact, as she writes, that a 'linguistic elite' arose in Bengal, as elsewhere in India at different times, whose members thereby maintained or acquired 'greater access to the power structure than other speech or dialect communities.'
2.   For an analysis of the multiple pressures that the Urdu-speaking elite, particularly the landlords among them, faced at the end of the nineteenth century, see Robinson (1975), esp., pp. 33–4.
3.   That is, those listed on the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which guarantees their use for certain official purposes. The figure for the number of Bhojpuri-speakers comes from Census of India 1991a, p. 77.
4.   A fact explicitly and commonly recognized and accepted in India. See, for example, a commentary on the opportunities provided to English-educated Indians for jobs in 'business process outsourcing . . . call centres,' in Anonymous 2003, pp. 2444–45. These jobs require near-perfect command of spoken, unaccented English, though, as an India specialist, I always know, from the ineradicable accent of the technician, when my calls to

Dell computer for technical support land in Bangalore, where the technicians are surprised when I ask if they are in fact in Bangalore.

5.   Swaan also takes notes of this (pp. 62–3 and 73). The official literacy figures of course, are much higher for males (64.1%) than for females (39.3%). The regional variation ranges from a low of 38.5% in benighted Bihar to a high of 89.8% in Kerala (Census of India, Census Data Online from *censusindia.net/cendat/datatable2.htm*).

6.   Khare (2002) has argued that, in effect, the predominance of English has meant the linguistic disempowerment of 'the overwhelming majority of India's population'. While I think that the disempowerment is relative, leaving intermediate levels of opportunities for many who have varying degrees of command of the languages of power, I also agree that the majority of the people of the country remain disempowered by the coexistence of social and linguistic hierarchies with widespread illiteracy. Further, even among the literate, it has been argued that there is a dramatic cultural and social divide between persons educated in English-medium schools and those educated in Hindi-medium schools in the Hindi-speaking areas of north India, in which the life chances of the English-educated and those who do not know English well are significantly different. See, on this point, the excellent article by Faust and Nagar (2001).

7.   Swaan (2001, pp. 77–8) also (sub)divides the elites at the highest, Union level, into three categories: users of English only, speakers of Hindu only, and those who use both Hindi and English, each set of whom have 'divergent interests'; among these three groups, those who have command of both Hindi and English have the strongest possible communicative position and, therefore, the most favourable life chances.

8.   As Probal Dasgupta (2001, p. 13) has remarked, 'the crucial correlation between literacy and bilingualism is missing'.

9.   See also his Q-value figures for English and Hindi at pp. 74–5, which appear to give a competitive advantage in general to English over Hindi, but the index numbers are difficult to comprehend and replicate, and contain some inaccuracies. Further, Swaan says at one point that, 'as second languages, Hindi and English are now on a par,' while also stating that 'the Q-value of English in the Indian constellation is about half that of Hindi' (p. 78). Each of these figures reflects different aspects of the competition between Hindi and English as the preferred language for enhancing one's life chances. My stress above is that English remains the pre-eminent language of prestige and opportunity in India and that non-Hindi-speakers have achieved a competitive advantage against Hindi-speakers in the number of persons who can use English.

10.   Faust and Nagar (p. 2,787), referring also to Rajni Kothari, *Growing Amnesia: An Essay on Poverty and Human Consciousness* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993).

11.   The term 'choice' assumes conscious decision on the part of students or their parents. This is not the right word for everyday code switching (Dasgupta 2001, p. 11), but it is more suitable when discussing Hindi and English bilingualism since 'nearly half the bilinguals for whom Hindi is the second language learn it in school' and 'nearly all the Indians who use English as a second language learn it that way' (p. 14).

12.   Manipuri is the spoken language of more than 60% of the population of the state of Manipur, but English is the official language of the state.

13.   Chatterjee (1993, pp. 6–7) makes this argument concerning the Bengali elite in the nineteenth century.

14.   Nor is this kind of symbolic linguistic divergence peculiar to north India. It has been mirrored in the artificial divergence between Croatian and Serbian, which appear to stand in nearly precisely the same relationship as Hindi and Urdu. Both cases constitute striking examples of linguistic change or purification or 're-standardization' for the purpose, on the one hand, of establishing standardized speech forms congruent with politically defined communities, while, on the other hand, setting up barriers of communication between such communities. Once again, language plays here a secondary role in communal/ethnic identification.

Arel (2002), who holds the opposite view to that presented here concerning the primacy of language identification in nationalist movements, nevertheless provides further

examples of its secondary character. The prevalence of Irish nationalism in the face of language loss, which he mentions, is well enough known. Less well known, to me at least, is the case of the Masurians, said to have spoken 'a dialectical variety of the Polish spoken in Warsaw,' who 'staunchly clung to a Prussian/German identity, claiming that their mother tongue did *not* politically matter.' While Arel argues that 'this did not prevent Polish nationalists from claiming that the Masurians were *theirs*,' (p. 92, emphasis in original) it would seem clearly to indicate the opposite point to the one he makes, that language is often clearly subordinate to other ethnonational identities.

15.   There is no evident reason, therefore, why there should be a greater degree of Urdu-consciousness among Muslims in Orissa and Karnataka where it has been presumed that Muslims, like their Hindu brethren, speak mostly Oriya or Kannada, respectively. Khalidi (2003, pp. 83–4), however, has cited interviewees in Bangalore, who claim that urban Muslims in Karnataka 'find it difficult to cope with the Kannada language'. A full under-standing of the differences among the several states in this respect will require an examina-tion of the relations between Hindus and Muslims in them, of the educational policies pursued with regard to provisions for the use of Urdu in the schools, and of political, social, and religious movements and institutions, which have sought to promote Urdu-conscious-ness in the several states.

16.   The reports of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities (of which the 1994–5 report cited here is the latest available), which used to be published by the Home Ministry of the Government of India and were largely ignored by most state governments, are now published (after a lapse of several years) under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. This switch is a fine example of newspeak, for, if any ministry has power in India, it is Home, whereas the 'Empowerment' ministry surely is at or near the bottom of the list of powerful ministries.

17.   E.g.: 'Any number of attributes like sweet, green, fertile, virgin etc. were used to describe Tamil to assert its sweetness, liveliness, vitality, purity and other qualities' (Annamalai 1979, pp. 39–40).

18.   Thus, when one says one hates another language, 'it means you hate the people speaking it.' There are also more subtle ways of expressing this feeling about another language and its speakers, as in the case against Hindi for its lack of 'richness', which amounts to a statement that its speakers are culturally deficient. The quotes come from a rather rare, Tamilian source of sentiment in favour of Hindi as the official language of India, M. Bhaktavatsalam, former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, (Bhaktvatsalam 1978, p. 16).

19.   This exchange, sharp but civil, was quite prolonged, intense, and, at least to me, unforgetable. It took place at a conference held 11–13 June 1976 at the University of Washington. The final papers from this conference were published in Sugar 1980.

20.   The figures vary from census to census depending upon the types of 'groupings' adopted and the definitions thereof. The figure of 48, for example, comes from Census of India 1999a, p. 3, where there is a list of 48 mother tongues included in Hindi, plus a further sub-grouping of 'Others,' numbering 4,642,964 persons.

21.   Ranked 83rd out of 216 recognized mother tongues (Census of India 1999a, p. 255).

22.   It should be stressed that these elites, though predominantly Muslim, comprised also high caste Hindus in government employment, especially from the Kayastha caste.

23.   On the rise of vernacular education and vernacular elites in the Marathi-speaking areas in the 19th century, see Naregal 2001, which is, however, somewhat deficient in providing detailed facts and figures on linguistic change, spread, education, literacy, and the like.

24.   See Britto (1986), which discusses, and applies to the Tamil language in south India, Ferguson's theory, and its 'extension' by Fishman.

25.   From Pandit Gauri Datta's Play (c. 1883–1900) in King (1992, p. 132).

26.   For the changing historical relationship in this respect between Tamil and Sanskrit, and their principal users and adherents (non-Brahmans and Brahmans), see Annamalai (1979), pp. 38–40.

27.   Indeed, Shapiro (1989, pp. 22–3) has argued that language purification movements carry the odour of moral as well as linguistic differentiation, dividing the morally/linguistically pure from their impure, even evil opposites.

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