

Language Policies in a Multilingual Context with Reference to India

T.S.Sridevi
M.Phil English
The American College

Abstract

This paper focuses on Language policies governing in a multilingual context with reference to India. One of the major challenges is to establish English in a multilingual context. India is the most complex society in the world with diverse culture and languages. The necessity of English Language Teaching in India differs from the period of colonisation to post colonisation. The impact of colonisation has changed the linguistic ecology of India. This paper deals with the language policies governing in the developed and developing nations. The research article has a detailed discussion about the language policies in commonwealth nations such as India which has not standardised its language policies due to the colonial hangover. It has further discussion on the universal language is slowly degrading in the developing nation due to socio-political influences.

Key words: mosaic multi-linguals, plurilingual, marginalised English, weird English, ethnic riots.

Language Policies in a Multilingual Context with Reference to India

T.S.Sridevi
M.Phil English
The American College

Hypothesis

Establishing English as a standard language in the multilingual nation like India.

Research design

1. What is language policy?
2. How English was brought into India?
3. How English is degraded in India?
4. What is the role of Indian schools to establish English?

Language Policy

Language policy is where linguists meet politics. Linguistic legislation serves as a medium through which power is negotiated between different speech communities within given society (Wikipedia). Language policy is constructed for the advancement of a language and the usage of the language in various domains of society like educational institution, journalism and administration, etc. Some of the factors that affect language policy are socio-cultural, political influence and the attitude of the speakers. Language policy is alterable and modifiable when they meet the demands of the language such as when the language is at the risk of falling out of use. Good language policy is essential for the development of a developing nation.

Some countries record their language policy in their constitution or in law. Some have the data about the number of people speaking various languages. But it is difficult to take census for a multilingual nation. India is the fourth largest country in speaking various languages approximately more than 308 languages according to Ethnologue in which 12 languages have constitutional recognition. The first three are Papua New Guinea speaking 823 languages, Indonesia speaking 726 languages and Nigeria speaking 505 languages respectively. Some of the countries like Hungary, Mongolia, Switzerland and UK speak around a minimum of 12 languages.

Language Policy in India

Before Independence

Before the British conquest, there were two competing educational systems followed in India: the Brahman and the Muslim. The former focused with the sacred texts of Hinduism and the medium of instruction was through Sanskrit; the latter focused on Qu'ran. But these two systems were replaced by the British Government. In the nineteenth century, the East India Company and the British Colonial government had a serious discussion about language policy for the schools. Macaulay's Minute was the initiation of the introduction of English in India. He believed that the goal of British education was to teach Western knowledge for the selected elites in English. But in contrary the Orientalist believed that the Western knowledge should be taught in vernacular. This position was slowly in progress but without replacing the regional English-medium schools.

Khubchandani noted that in Government schools, three linguistic patterns were followed due to the compromise between the anglicist and orientalist policies. There were elite English-medium schools in the larger urban centres. In towns, two sorts of schools were run by the British government: one with the vernacular used for primary education and other with English for secondary and advanced education. In rural areas, only primary education was offered in the vernacular.

At the time of Independence

The opposition to the British government had linguistic components. With the establishment of Indian National Congress and rising Hindu consciousness, a movement developed to promote Hindi written in the Devanagiri script. On the other hand, in the United and Central provinces, Hindustani written in Persian script was more or less identical with Urdu and it was supported by the government. Nationalists competed with English by cultivating their regional languages. Hindus cultivated Hindi by borrowing words from Sanskrit and Muslims borrowed Persian words from Urdu. But these two languages slowly moved apart. Gandhi was not pleased with the elitist nature of Hindi; he had a hope to unite Hindu with Muslim by developing an urban colloquial Hindi which could be written either in Devanagiri or Persian script. But still the position of Sanskrit was supported by the Hindi Language reformers.

In the Newly Independent India

In 1948, India has faced the complex language issues. While making Hindi as official language, ten other regional languages were also made official. Hindi was the largest speaking language and hence it was selected as the national and official language; it tried to unify independent India and ultimately guarantee national unity. Article 51 of the constitution required the federal government “to promote the spread of Hindi language, to develop it so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements in the composite culture of India (177)” English was replaced by Hindi within a short span of fifteen years. But the task was made more difficult for the supporters of Hindi and they had to fight on two fronts: to establish Hindi among other regional languages and to take on English for its global strength. After recognizing the reality in 1963, English was allowed to use for official purposes by the Official Language Act.

The newly independent states including India had three competing views on language policies: the first was to recognise the indigenous languages for official purposes; the second was to make the mother-tongue as medium of instruction in all educational

institutions; and the third was to establish a national language for political unity. The first was very obvious with the rejection of the metropolitan colonial language. The second was in a debate on what count as the mother-tongue. Khubchandani reported that only those languages which had a developed written tradition was considered as mother-tongue (quoted in Spolsky 178). However the linguistic minorities stated that the home language of the child should also be counted as mother-tongue. Hence India accepted the home language of the child was made the medium of instruction in primary and lower secondary schools. Hindi served as the official medium and for the national unity for all of India. English was learned for higher education and international communication. These three language formula was interpreted differently in many parts of India. A very few states included Sanskrit and others added a fourth regional language.

Dyadic and Triadic Polities

Lambert has categorised the nation states into three types such as Dyadic, Triadic and Mosaic. The first two states are countries with two or three languages in active competition. Nations such as Belgium, Switzerland and Tanzania divide their socio-linguistic space by identifying two official (or national) languages in a constitution. The use of two or more languages may be due to the combination of two or more distinct speech communities into a single political unit or due to the introduction of another language by colonial powers.

Mosaic Multilinguals

Mosaic multilinguals are the complex nation states. Recognising two or three languages and divide their functions will not work in a country that includes a dozen or a hundred or several hundred languages. Countries like Indonesia, Nigeria and India come under this category.

India is a mosaic multi-lingual nation speaking around 387 languages in which the Indian Constitution has recognised eleven official languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi,

Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. English is recognised as associate official language. Hindi is the official language of five states and two union territories. The other eleven states recognize each of the eleven major languages for various official purposes.

Deadly Ethnic Riots

In India, language is associated with conflict and even violence. While standardising a specific language in each state of the nation, language war may seem to occur. Horowitz calls it as “deadly ethnic riots”, which he defines as “attacks by civilians belonging to one ethnic group on civilians from another group” (quoted in Spolsky 2). He lists a number of recent examples of ethnic riots such as Assam in 1960 & 1972, Ranchi in 1967, Hyderabad in 1972 and Bangalore in 1994. Assam the north-east state of India, tried to make Assamese its official state language in the favour of obtaining positions for the natives and in 1956, South India protested against the proposal to make Hindi as the official language. Horowitz found that the main associated factors to these deadly riots are not to be linguistic but religious, communal or generally ethnic.

Plurilingual Proficiency

Srivastava noted that Plurilingual refers to usually differentiated skills in several languages of an individual member of such a community (quoted in Spolsky 176). In India, there are two kinds of plurilingual proficiency. One kind is Elite plurilingualism and the other is Folk plurilingualism. The former is produced by education and it consists of English with one or more Indian languages. The latter is widespread throughout the nation and it is a combination of a home or ethnic language with a dominant regional language. Depending on the complex patterns of multilingualism, associated plurilingual competence may emerge. Apart from these issues, communication works almost as well in multilingual as a monolingual society in day to day life.

Weird English

Indian English teachers have marginalised English on par with other utility-based subjects such as mathematics and science. They allocate very less hours for English classes. This makes the students lose their interest in language classes. English teachers handle English like puppet and bring all the rules under their control. They modify, alter and tabulate the rules of grammar like mathematic formulae to suit their circumstances.

English is introduced in India by the higher officials of England to unplug the natives from their cultural identity. Unfortunately, English is unplugged from its identity of origin by the socio-cultural influences of the native. It is a hard nut to crack to change the attitude of Indians towards English. Sometimes they produce unrecognizable languages created by one or more languages with English. Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien calls it as 'weird english' and it constitutes the new language of literature, implicitly launching a new literary theory. Weird English arise out of Colonial hangover and it is a new writerly genre in the 20th century. Multilingual writers like Arundhati Roy, Junot Diaz come under this category. Generally all languages operate according to its rules but weird English explicitly creates its own rules. Weird English writers experiment with English and they invent rules only after the creation of the language. These writers are socio-political concerned since they do not want to be labelled untranslatable.

Thus the 21st century Indians are the producers of English; they mix up their mother tongue with English and produce their own dialect of English according to their convenience. Such hybrid variety of English soon started spreading throughout the locality faster than a contagious disease. When such hybrids of a universal language are playfully used by the teachers and other higher officials at some instances, students and other people take it for granted, ignoring the real usage. To get rid of this, we have to avoid the native perspective completely.

Summation

Everything changes in India except the language policy. The language policy that was

followed in the 19th and 20th century is still following in the 21st century. English plays a vital role in employment and education to empower the citizens. It has become an important qualification to enter into an institution. During the period of colonisation India was consuming English but after the Independence, it has got independence to produce English according to its demands. Except government schools using regional language, English has continued to be the medium of instruction in all systems due to the pressure of modernisation along with globalisation. In the recent years, the position of English is unquestioned and whether the spread of English can be stopped.

It is a threat to the younger generations of India to make them standardise in English to meet the needs of this Technological era. Students have very low proficiency of English when they pass out from the school. This is because they don't get exposure to the major four skills of English language such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. They are only asked to reproduce what they have learnt in the school with their teacher's guidance. Language is a skill and it has to be acquired by a learner like a child acquiring its mother tongue without any effort. Hence there is a need to frame language policy in India for the betterment of the society. If the Constitution of India will make English as the medium of instruction in all the government schools, ultimately all the citizens get equal exposure of global language without any partiality. Analysing the possibilities to overcome the shortcomings of language policy in a multilingual nation gives further scope of study.

Works Cited

Evelyn Nien-mingChien, *Weird English*, New Foundation Books, 2004.

Spolsky, *Bernard, Language Policy*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2004.