Ideologies in Practice: Understanding the Case of Multilingual Migrants in Classrooms of Delhi

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The city of Delhi, which receives the highest number of migrants among states of India, offers a unique opportunity to study issues related to language, education and diversity. This paper looks at migration, its impact on Delhi’s linguistic profile and its role within educational scenarios. Data collected from government schools of Delhi shows that teaching and learning in Indian classrooms is guided by monolingual ideologies that translate into separatist pedagogies and affect negatively the natural translanguaging practices of multilingual migrants. This paper argues that the education system forces student and teachers to “play monolingual” within classrooms, thus promoting linguistic homogenization.

Key words: Migration, multilingualism, education, policy and classroom practices.

Introduction

The capital of India, Delhi, has attracted people from all parts of the country throughout history. In post-independent India, Delhi has emerged as the city of hope for those young citizens who are looking for better occupational opportunities and higher standards of living. A comparative analysis of reports of census of India show that the percentage of migrants increased from a mere 8.76% in 1971 to 22.22% by the year 2001. This expansion in the migrant population has resulted, on the one hand, in culturally and linguistically diversified demography of the city; on the other, in a number of systemic challenges in terms of provisions for adequate housing facilities, job opportunities, and education.

A study conducted on “Counter Magnet Areas to Delhi and NCR” (National Capital Regions) by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs of India (n. d.) argues that most of the people who migrate from other states of India to Delhi work as semi-skilled laborers. These laborers come to the city after giving up their traditional agriculture-related occupations due to low returns. The 2001 census report shows that, in addition to reasons related to work and employment (37.56%), a large group of migrants move to the city with their household (36.78%). The latter group of migrants is comprised primarily of women who might stay at home to take care of children or work as semi-skilled laborers, and of children who are admitted to no cost/low cost government schools once they arrive in the city.

These demographic realities reflect directly in the classrooms of schools situated in Delhi. The composition of classrooms of the government schools is heterogeneous, marked by plurality of cultures and linguistic practices. This paper aims to study how
languages that are brought to classrooms are negotiated within interactions between students and teachers. India’s education policy calls for the use of multilingualism as a resource in the process of teaching and learning. It provides for teaching and learning of at least three languages at schools, including children’s mother tongue. In the presence of several mother tongues within every classroom, understanding how the policy translates into practice becomes an important issue for both language educators and policy makers. This paper will focus on the processes that are involved in translation of the policy into practice and argue that monolingual ideology that governs India’s education system at underlying level results in suppression of multilingualism, and encourages migrants to accommodate into majority languages.

Methodology

The study was conducted in three government schools situated in the city of Delhi. The data was collected from grades 1, 4, 6, 8 and 11. The data consisted of seventy-five hours of classroom observations, voice recordings of classroom conversations, semi-structured interviews of teachers, and a survey in which students were asked to report about the language practices used at their homes. The data was analyzed using discourse analysis.

It must be clarified that the term migration in this paper refers to inter-state movement of people on seasonal or permanent basis for voluntary or involuntary reasons. This paper will not discuss issues related to migration from or to India from other countries of the world. The paper has been delimited to study linguistic and educational implication of temporary or permanent migration of people into the city of Delhi from other states of India. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms have been assigned to the participants in the data that will be presented in this paper.

Migration and Delhi

Migration is one of the bitter realities of third-world countries like India, where development has remained largely urban centric. Industrialization and upsurge of metropolitan cities has generated a large scale need of skilled and semi-skilled laborers, whereas rural India has been witnessing a gradual decrease in returns from traditional agriculture-related works and concomitant loss of people’s inclination towards such occupations. This trend, which has functioned to motivate migration into cities, is apparent in the reports of census of India, which show that almost 29% of the people who moved to Delhi in the decade 2001-2011 migrated in search of better work-related opportunities. In the decade 1991-2001, 64.25% of the migrants belonged to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two of the poorest states of the country. The “Study on Counter Magnate Areas to Delhi and NCR” (n. d.) argues that a large portion of migrant population settles in temporary shelters called jhuggi jhopri (slum) clusters near railway stations, bus terminals, construction cities, and wholesale market areas that provide source of livelihood to these migrants.
These densely populated temporary settlements do not always have access to facilities such as clean water or proper sanitation, but they are dynamic sites that are highly multicultural, where people belonging to different parts of the country, different religions, speaking different languages, live in close proximity to each other. These migrants also maintain a regular social contact with their relatives, parents, friends and significant others whom they leave in their native places. The “Study on Counter Magnate Areas to Delhi and NCR” (n. d.) shows that more than 55 percent of the migrants pay at least one visit to their native town every year, while another 20 percent to 30 percent visit their native towns twice in a year.

Linguistically, this state of the situation seems to point at a larger case, which is that of additive (if not dynamic) multilingualism, that must be at play in the context of migrants in Delhi. Additive multilingualism refers to increase of one’s linguistic repertoire by the means of learning a new language(s), without losing languages which were learnt earlier. People who migrate into Delhi often add Hindi, which is the named language spoken by 81 percent of people living in Delhi, to their linguistic repertoire (Census, 2001). Data from the census of India 2011 shows the presence of speakers of all 22 languages, which have been listed in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution, in Delhi. It is needless to state that classrooms in Delhi, especially those that cater to the educational needs of lower income groups, are highly multilingual and multicultural.

**Migration, Education and Languaging**

A survey conducted to draw linguistic profiles of student participants at the initial stages of this research study showed that despite this scenario, most of the students studying in the three government schools of Delhi reported Hindi as the only language that they know and/or that is spoken at their home. Astonishingly, even some of the South-Indian and Muslim students stated Hindi to be their home language in the survey, despite the fact that the communities to which they belong have shown a strong sense of linguistic, cultural and/or religious identity, and have opposed the promotion of Hindi in the past.

The researcher had also come across instances where students were observed speaking a variety of standard Hindi with their parents who dropped them to the school in the morning or picked them up in the evening; however, when asked to report the languages/language varieties that are spoken at their homes, students said that they use exactly the same language that is spoken at the school at their homes. Theoretically, linguists have problematized Hindi by claiming it to be an umbrella term that has been assigned to a number of language varieties in government reports such as the census (Khan, 2006). In these classrooms, even when the researcher encouraged the students to report about their real linguistic practices by specifying if they speak/understand a particular variety of Hindi, or of any other named language, students often hesitated and shied away from talking about multiplicity of their language practices. Consider the following conversation for instance:
Conversation 1: The researcher calls a grade 4 student and encourages her to talk about the language(s) that is spoken at her home. The researcher had noticed that the student’s mother uses a variety of Hindi with her when she arrived at the school in the morning.

Researcher: Idhar aao. Aapke ghar me kaun si bhasha me baat karte ha
Garima: Pata nahi. Hindi me hi karte hai, jaise aap karte ho.
Researcher: Hindi me to nahi karte. Mummy papa apas me kisi or bhasha me bolte hai na?
Garima: Gann ki.
Researcher: Kaun si bhasha hai aapko pata ha
Garima: Mere ko to aati bhi nahi.
Researcher: Aati bhi nahi aapko? Samajh me to aati hoga.
Garima: Samajh me bhi nahi aati.
Researcher: Arre! Mere mummy papa jis me bolte hai mereko samajh me to aa jati hai. Bolni to nahi aati.
Garima: Aap bade ho na isiliye.
Researcher: Achha! Garima: Nahi to nahi aati (mumbles and goes away).

Translation
Researcher: Come here. Which language is used at your home?
Garima: I don’t know. (We) talk in Hindi, just like you do.
Researcher: It’s not Hindi. Mom dad talk in another language, don’t they?
Garima: The village’s.
Researcher: Which language is it, do you know?
Garima: I don’t even use it.
Researcher: You don’t even use it? You do understand it.
Garima: I don’t even understand it.
Researcher: Oh. I understand the language that my mom and dad talk in, although I can’t speak it.
Garima: You are a grown up, that’s why.
Researcher: Really!
Garima: Otherwise you wouldn’t have (mumbles and goes away).’

In the above example, students’ unwillingness to talk about their real language practices is evident in the fact that Garima refuses to accept that her parents speak in a language that is different from the one that is spoken at school. After accepting that some other language is spoken by her parents at her home, she attempts to deny that she can understand or speak it at all. Her use of the lexeme “bhi” (even) emphasizes the fact that she does not want to share the name of the language or acknowledge that she knows it. When the researcher attempts to make her feel comfortable by talking
about her own language practices in a very informal way, the student tries to pursue a new line of argument to save herself from having a discussion on this topic.

Conversations such as these happened several times during the process of data collection. Appendix A presents a list of languages that were reported by the students as being spoken at their homes in the first instance, and researcher’s superscript that was added later, after approaching some of the students personally, engaging with them in a discussion, and encouraging them to report about their real language practices irrespective of the standards. Despite all this, the table shows that only a few named majority languages have been able to enter the list.

Hence, although students were observed to be constantly engaging in translanguaging, that is, fluid and dynamic ways in which multilinguals use the totality of their linguistic repertoire (Garcia, 2009; Otheguy et al., 2015), outside the premises of the school, they rarely engaged in such linguistic practices inside classrooms. This indicates that classrooms are restrictive spaces that add to the processes of linguistic homogenization that migrants often go through in the context of Delhi. The fact that participants hesitate to name the languages that are spoken at their homes, and they rather choose to name the standard language of the school as their home language, implies that the school is a system that is not conducive to plurality of languages, let alone plurality and hybridity of language practices that is being supported in the literature on translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2014).

**Factors Affecting Linguistic Homogenization**

A number of factors, such as the policy of education, curriculum, teachers’ perceptions, their ideology, market forces and parents’ expectations, function in tacit ways to contribute to the processes of linguistic homogenization that shapes migrant students’ linguistic practices within classrooms. These variables will be discussed in detail in this section.

The foreword of India’s National Curriculum Framework (2005) states that “mother tongue is a critical conduit, (and) that social, economic and ethnic backgrounds are important for enabling children to construct their own knowledge” (para. 2). India’s education policy (1986) also states that multilingualism should be seen as a resource in the process of teaching and learning. The strategy that the education policy advocates for in order to promote multilingualism is the three-language formula. The formula proposes that the first language to be taught and learnt at school should be the mother tongue or the regional language, the second language should be a modern Indian language or English, and the third language should be a modern Indian language or English, whichever has not been taught as the second language. Although it cannot be challenged in terms of its intent, the policy promotes what linguists have called parallel monolingualism in three languages rather than multilingualism (Pallavi, 2016). The policy does not take into account the fact that terms such as mother tongue, first language, second language, developed in monolingual contexts where languages are learnt sequentially; in highly multilingual contexts such as India, where children
learn several languages concurrently and use them in dynamic ways by translanguaging, these terms hardly hold any relevance. The policy is being guided by a monolingual ideology that uses monolingual ways of using a language as a standard to explain the nature of language practices of multilinguals (Mohanty, 2009).

On the other hand, despite the child-centric pedagogy that is advocated within policies, in third world countries such as India, classrooms have remained largely teacher-centric in nature. How stated curriculum translates into practice is often guided by teacher’s ideology and her perceptions about the process of teaching and learning, rather than by the policy. The data of this research study shows that the perceptions that teachers hold regarding languages affect the kind of multilingualism that manifests in classrooms in tacit ways. Put more specifically, teachers make certain assumptions regarding student’s language use, and communication of these assumptions to students function to demarcate what is expected of them within classrooms. The following conversation exemplifies this process:

**Conversation 2** (Grade 11; Subject: Home Science; Italics: Hindi; Bold: English). The teacher asks Gargi to come in the front of the class and read a chapter from her textbook. Gargi reads the heading of the chapter aloud.
- **Teacher:** *Mujhe de do ek book.* (Dipika gives a book to the teacher. The teacher looks into the book. Gargi reads the heading again.)
- **Teacher:** *Aswasthata! Kya padha tha aswasthata ko tumne? Dhang se Hindi bhi padni nahi aati?* (Gargi remains quiet.) Ruganta, aswasthata or bimari. Yani ki ruganta ya bimari ka bhi sharirik pushti or rogyata par asar padta hai. Agar hum bimar honge...

**Translation**
- **Teacher:** *Give me a book.* (Dipika gives a book to the teacher. The teacher looks into the book. Gargi reads the heading again.)
- **Teacher:** *Illness! What did you read illness as? Don’t you even know how to read Hindi?* (Gargi remains quiet) *Sickness, illness or disease. This means, sickness or disease also affects bodily health and ability. If we get ill...*

The example shows that Hindi is perceived by the teacher as a language that every student should be proficient in. Remarks such as the one made by the teacher reinforces amongst the students the perception of Hindi as being “the language” of communication in Delhi, naturalizing and establishing higher status of Hindi in the context. What must also be studied are the effects that such perceptions have on multilingual language practices of students. It is because of these perceptions that named languages other than Hindi, as well as numerous varieties of Hindi that students bring with themselves to the school, fail to find adequate space in classrooms. Communication of such perceptions not only alienates migrants who might still be
struggling with Hindi, but also puts forth the expectation that the school has from students, that is, to learn Hindi.

In addition, market forces have given languages such as Hindi and English a status that ensures high returns in terms of employment opportunities. It is not surprising that in this context parent’s often demand that children learn prestigious languages as quickly as possible. It has already been well documented how government schools in India had to change their language education policy to introduce English from grade 1 (instead of grade 6), because of parents’ demand and tough competition from low-cost English medium private schools (Nambissan, 2012). The data of this research study also illustrates the dominance of these two languages in the context of Delhi, since in seventy-five hours of conversational data that was recorded, it was only twice that any other language than Hindi and English was heard being spoken on the school premises. The other languages, Marwadi and Punjabi, were used by students to pass comments on each other on the playground.

Teachers were never observed to be using any other language than Hindi and English while teaching. Many teachers attempted to keep even Hindi and English segregated within classrooms, scolding students whenever they shuffled between the two (refer to Pallavi, 2016, for a detailed discussion on this). Students were expected to choose a medium of instruction, which could either be Hindi or English, from grade one onwards, and all the written work they submitted, including their answers in examinations, had to be produced in that language only. Given this context, students had no choice than to suppress their multilingualism and “play monolingual” in classrooms.

Language practices that migrants bring with themselves into classrooms apparently had no space within this system. A combined result of the education policy, pedagogy, monolingual ideology, market forces and perceptions of stakeholders, was linguistic homogenization. It is needless to state that this kind of homogenization functions to suppress pluralities and multiplicities. It discriminates against that marginalized section of the society which is forced to move from one place to another in search of source(s) of livelihood, while benefitting those who own linguistic capital and have better chances to secure stable employment to support their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that although India’s education policy states that it is committed to the goal of multilingualism, heterogeneity of languages or language practices is rejected and suppressed in classrooms of Delhi. A number of factors, such as an underlying monolingual ideology that guides the policy, the curriculum, teacher’s pedagogy, their perceptions, market forces and parents’ expectations, work in tacit ways to shape the linguistic practices of multilingual students. Migrants, who may not possess linguistic capital that is encapsulated in dominant languages, formulate the group that is affected negatively by this process of linguistic homogenization.
References


### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Language at School</th>
<th>Language at Home</th>
<th>Language That Child Uses</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
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