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RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE ASSOCIATION OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND SOCIETY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT



Language is influenced by social power relations, and language is used as an instrument to exercise social power. Social factors condition the language learning process as well as the exchanges between differently-aligned groups and domains. The primary objective of this article is to critically examine the dynamic relationship between the second language learner and the society with its constellation of complex determinants. Teachers need to appreciate the diverse dimensions of power in society and contemplate the role of the second language (English for the present context) in expressing, establishing, perpetuating, as well as contesting power relations in society. In particular, there needs to be deliberation on the contexts of identity, social class or caste, education, gender, media, politics as well as ethnicity.

Keywords: *Second Language, Learners, Society, India.*

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INTRODUCTION

A perpetual interplay of Language and society has been at the core of conflicts, concords, collusions and collisions over time immemorial. Social factors condition the language learning process as well as the exchanges between differently-aligned groups and domains. Teachers need to appreciate the diverse dimensions of power in society and contemplate the role of the second language (English for the present context) in expressing, establishing, perpetuating, as well as contesting power relations in society. In particular, there needs to be deliberation on the contexts of identity, social class or caste, education, gender, media, politics as well as ethnicity. Additionally, the impact of globalization on the power hierarchy of languages across the world also needs to be explicated.

SPEECH COMMUNITY

The notion of Speech community is central to the comprehension of how language and interactions occur in societies spread across the globe. It describes a more or less discrete group of people who exchange information, thoughts and feelings using the faculty of speech, in a unique and mutually accepted way amongst themselves. Speech communities are not organized around linguistic facts but around people who share a similar world view, adhere to certain established patterns of behaviour and strongly feel about their belonging to a speech community that defines their unique identity; the language in use constructs represents and embodies meaningful participation in society. Now, even amongst the second language learners of English in the Indian context, there can be speech communities

that beget, believe and behave in unique ways and therefore have separate feature matrices for characterization and identification. For instance, there can be speech communities of Gujarati learners of English and Bengali learners of English, having divergent world views, codes and contexts of interaction, aspirations, individuation as well as associative preferences. There can be further segmentation as in a speech community of English learners from the capital of Bengal, Kolkata versus a speech community of English learners from one of the districts, Burdwan.

According to Lyons (1970: 326), a speech community can be broadly interpreted as “a community where all the people use a given language or dialect.” Apart from Lyons’ perspective, all others emphasize the connectedness, scope of exchange and codes of the community to understand a speech community. Hockett came up with the crucial point of communication amongst the members of a community, for them to be regarded as constituting a community. For example, learners from Ahmedabad exclusively using English, learners from Chennai speaking English and learners from Mumbai speaking English, would form a speech community if they are considered from Lyons’ viewpoint. But when they choose not to spontaneously communicate with each other, despite sharing the same language, they cannot be acknowledged as forming a speech community. Therefore, they are labelled as separate speech communities. This is where Hockett’s logic comes into play. Consequently, in the Indian context, factored by perplexing sociolinguistic variables, English learners from the capital of a state will not readily socialize or



identify themselves with English learners from the districts or rural areas. There are workable relations but there is no spontaneous and intentional effort to connect due to issues of prestige, power and aspiration.

LINGUISTIC MARKET & HABITUS

According to Bourdieu (1981), a *linguistic market* comprises the social structures (formal & informal contexts, public & private contexts, religion, law, etc.) within which each social structure or situation has its own *habitus*. *Habitus* can be understood as a set of dispositions or attitudes, which incline people to develop certain patterns of behaviour (including linguistic), knowingly or unknowingly. These dispositions generate actions by the language users in a regular and specific way. In each linguistic market, a specific linguistic behaviour (language, accent, pitch, tone, etc.) has "higher" currency (prestige, honour, respect). It can be defined by the capacity/power of individuals to successfully function in a social group and achieve the intended effect. Each market's currency of language is different from others. The best code is the one which "gets the job done." For instance, in order to successfully function in the corporate class (in India), the speaker (aspiring to succeed), must have the linguistic capital of fluency in English (along with the cultural capital of style, clothing and mannerism).

The learners from the capital region aspire to speak in a particular prestigious accent (for them, it could be British or American or even a neutral accent), use English in a particular way (choice of words, idioms, native nuances) and thereby they target incorporating their linguistic structures as closely as

possible, to be at par with them or be recognizable in a dynamic group as one who speaks in such a way, gaining in-group capital and favour of the listeners. The learners from the districts, on the other hand, target incorporating the speech pattern of those from the capital, as for them that constitutes the first level of aspiration. This would enable them to gain acceptance within groups of learners from the capital, and once that is accomplished their aspiration moves onto the next level i.e. a more prestigious speech style or way of using language.

LANGUAGE & SOCIAL CLASS

A convenient way to analyze a person's language usage is to capture sociolinguistic variables, which "are linguistic features that show statistically significant variation along the lines of social variables, like class positions, ethnicity, age, sex, etc." (Foley).

Peter Trudgill, focusing on the variables of occupation, income, education, locality and housing, collected data from different parts of Norwich, England, to examine whether social variables influence the way people interact. However, he attributed greater value to the perception of the speech community rather than self-perception. Trudgill studied variation in word-final '-ing' in words like running (runnin') and swimming (swimmin') in Norwich, England. Trudgill found that variation across speech styles parallels variation across social class. Trudgill also studied the effect of gender on variation in word-final '-ing' in words like running (runnin') and swimming (swimmin'). He found that women tend to use more standard language features than men whereas men tend to use more vernacular forms in their speech. Now, gender is another



interesting variable that introduces interesting ways of using English between the two standard groups (males versus females).

GENDER & LANGUAGE

Robin Lakoff's study threw up some very

interesting observations distinguishing the way women use English from that of men. Also, subsequent studies by Deborah Tannen and many others opened up a whole new way of analysing men and women's speech styles.

Men's speech	Women's speech
<p>The speech pattern in men conveys surety and at times over-confidence.</p> <p>For example: Negligible and minimal use of phrases indicating uncertainty.</p> <p>The speech pattern highlights male psyche to establish one's viewpoint as true and beyond question.</p>	<p>The speech pattern is conspicuously marked by a lack of confidence and doubtfulness. There is also a certain evasiveness to be as brief as possible. This is termed as 'hedging'. For example: use of 'not very sure', 'kind of', 'maybe', 'it seems like' in women's speech glaringly portrays a tendency to hedge.</p> <p>The notion of hedging differs cross- culturally. It is often done to co-operate with the interlocutor and be friendly with the person. In certain cultures, this behaviour is considered as powerful as the power lies in getting work done.</p>



<p>Men prefer using direct imperatives to get things done.</p> <p>For example: i) Close the door.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">ii) Get me some food.</p> <p>This results from the message-oriented mode of male communication.</p>	<p>Women prefer the use of super-polite forms, in order to avoid being imposing and domineering. The purpose is to make the addressed feel comfortable and equal in an interaction.</p> <p>For example: i) Would you mind trying to get a glass of water?</p> <p>ii) Let us try to build this.</p> <p>This is due to the fact that women consider conversation to be crucial for forging relations and strengthening social ties.</p>
<p>Men apologize considerably lesser than women. (Less use of 'sorry')</p>	<p>Women apologize much more than men. (considerably more use of 'sorry')</p>

The Deficit Theory emerged from Robin Lakoff's revolutionary work on 'women's language'. From her findings, Lakoff convincingly testified that women's language lacked assertiveness and reflected the powerlessness associated with the feminine form. Women's lack of confidence stemmed from their low self-esteem, reinforced by the discriminating social norms of a patriarchal power hierarchy. The 'deficit' sprouts from the marginalisation of women by restricting access to domains and education. Women were regarded as naturally, physically and psychologically weak and this is manifested in their speech. The theory and its implications were widely condemned and critically discussed. Along with these issues, there is also evidence of sexism in linguistic expressions. For instance, a male lexicon is used for both generic and male reference (man → human beings, people, person, humanity). In case of titles too, women (Ms;

Mrs) but not men (Mr) are labelled as married or unmarried. Feminine forms too are deduced from their masculine counterparts and are regarded as unmarked.

Masculine	Feminine
Prince	Princess
Count	Countess
Waiter	Waitress
Heir	Heiress

At this point, a discussion on power and its implications for the use of English in the Indian context, becomes pertinent.

LANGUAGE & POWER

In the rational physical world, power is a quantifiable variable, calculated with respect to the



expenditure of energy for the execution of some measurable work. From a social perspective, power is the institutionalised ability to influence actions and interactions. Power is quite an abstract concept, but infinitely important influence on our lives. Moore and Hendry (1982) describe it as: "...the force in society that gets things done, and by studying it, we can identify who controls what, and for whose benefit."

One way we see power at work in society is through politics. 'Political power' controls many aspects of our lives. This power is enforced through individuals such as police officers, judges and prison officers, whose jobs give them the right to affect other people's lives. Other people who have power as a consequence of their roles include teachers, parents and employers. We can classify this kind of power as 'personal power'. Finally, some social groups have more or less power than others. The poor, the disabled, ethnic minorities and women are all groups which may find themselves having lower social status, fewer economic resources, and being discriminated against. Typically, the people with most 'social group power' are white, wealthy and male. But in all these areas, it is the medium of Language that perpetuates and sustains the directional nature of power hierarchy. Scholars, like Fowler (1985) and Kramarae, Schultz and O'Barr (1984), have supported the view that power is developed and maintained via interaction i.e. the "social practice" of language. They argue that language or discourse serves to construct and manipulate concepts of power in society.

Power is demonstrated through language; it is also actually achieved or 'done' through language. For example, political power exists by means of language, through speeches, debates, through the

rules of who may speak and how debates are to be conducted. Laws are written and discussed in language, and individuals give orders through language. It isn't just in the public sphere that power is 'done' through language. For example, teachers often talk to learners in a way which makes quite clear the power relationship between the teacher and the learner.

Language often serves the interests of dominant social groups, usually because these are the groups who have the most control over it: politicians and lawyers, owners of international media conglomerates, and other influential, high-profile figures. Consequently, the oppression of those with less power, and less access to the media and the production of written records can seem natural, normal or even invisible.

Language is influenced by social power relations, and language is used as an instrument to exercise social power. For instance, English is the language of the colonizers, has immensely influenced the languages in the British colonies. Borrowing from, and mixing of English code with languages of the "colonized" has been a worldwide phenomenon. English address terms are readily used in Indian languages (Mummy/Mom, Papa/Dad, etc.). By using a certain language or code, the socially powerful exercise or propagate, sustain and establish their own power. By making the use of English mandatory, the colonizers exercised their power. The language also expresses or symbolizes certain ideology (worldview), which is also promoted through the use of language (English). By making English mandatory, it was not only the language. But the entire ideology was promoted by the colonizers. Currently, the US



English wields the power which has once again promoted the ideology of the United States (lifestyle, values, etc.).

Moving on, English is not just used in one particular way throughout society. There are different functionalities of English and thereby such functional changes are reflected in its linguistic manifestation. A register is the form of the language that is used in a particular domain. So, a register is a domain-governed phenomenon. A register is a language or a dialect or a linguistic code, which is used in a particular domain defined for a particular purpose, therefore register is a variety determined by the purpose. So it is not that any variety spoken in a domain, but for a particular purpose. For example, there is a medical register, that linguistic code is a specific code, devised for the purpose of communication and interaction in the setup of the medical field. Therefore, people functional in that domain are expected to be able to use that register.

“You speak as if you are a doctor” or “You speak as if you are a nurse”, are statements made in the context of register and associating professionals on the basis of their spoken register.

There is a way of speaking, a way of manipulating language and certain structures that are supposed to be used. For example, in the medical register, there are many borrowed specialized Latin-based vocabulary items.

CONCLUSION

There are a plethora of issues that teachers need to be aware of while delineating interactions between language and society in the Indian context. It is all the more important as, in the words of Crystal,

“India has a unique position in the English-speaking world. It is a linguistic bridge between the major first-language dialects of the world, such as British and American English, and the major foreign-language varieties, such as those emerging in China and Japan.

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