

Mohanty, Ajit

GIRISHWAR MISRA

Ajit Mohanty has made significant contributions to research on multilingualism, bilingualism, multilingual education, interventions for cognitive development, poverty issues, language processing, and socialization. He was born in 1946 in Puri, Orissa, India, and he graduated from Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, in 1969 with a master's degree in psychology. His mentors at Utkal included Professors Radhanath Rath and J. P. Das. Mohanty joined the educational psychology program at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada (1973–7), where he taught courses on human development, and earned the prestigious Killam Scholarship and a PhD in psycholinguistics (in 1978) with Professor W. H. O. Schmidt as his supervisor.

Mohanty started his academic career as lecturer in psychology in 1969 and was elevated, at the age of 37, to the position of professor in 1983 at the Centre for Advanced Study at Utkal. In 2003, he shifted to the multidisciplinary Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and continues there as senior faculty. He was a senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA (1981–2), a Senior Fellow at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore (1986–7), and a Fulbright Visiting Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University (2007–8). Mohanty's training at Alberta helped him develop a critical perspective, scientific rigor, and professional sophistication. On his return from Canada in 1978, he started research on the cognitive consequences of bilingualism among the indigenous Kond people in Orissa, with the methodological advantage of drawing monolingual and bilingual samples from the same sociocultural context. He continued to work on Konds and many other indigenous (tribal) linguistic communities in India. Besides his pioneering work on bilingualism, he worked on developmental psycholinguistics, sentence processing, and reading, focusing on grammatical and orthographic features of Indian languages. He developed a tradition of psycholinguistic research in modern India and trained a generation of scholars.

Some of Mohanty's early works were on the processing of ambiguous sentences, culture and Piagetian conservation, the perceptual complexity of linguistic structures, and reading. Extending the linkages of language and cognition, he investigated aspects of prose comprehension, metalinguistic awareness, and context effects on word order in Kui, Oriya, and Hindi languages. His work on bilingualism and its psychological and pedagogical implications has been seminal. Examining the practices of bi- and multilingualism in society in general and education in particular, he has pioneered multilingual education (MLE) in India and is known for his MLE Plus intervention (in collaboration with Minati Panda) in schools for Kui and Saora children. He worked with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas in 2009 to develop Nepal's policy and strategy for MLE. Currently, he is a member of a team to develop Bhutan's new national education framework in which he focuses on the languages-in-education policy.

Mohanty views MLE for indigenous children as a way out of the vicious cycle of language disadvantage. In his more recent works, he has examined the hierarchical "double divide" among the languages in Indian society and its implications for perpetuating inequality and marginalization. He shows how language disadvantage leads to capability deprivation of tribal mother-tongue speakers in India. He has also examined the issues of identity and intergroup relationship in tribal and nontribal contact situations.

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As a leader in the academic world of psychology in India, Mohanty is associated with the movement of indigenous psychology and relevance to the societal context. This has resulted in his analyses of poverty and social disadvantage leading to his concept of the “weaning syndrome” as a possible consequence of gratuitous relief. Language acquisition and socialization have been his other concerns. He has studied the maternal influences on development of speech style in Hindi-speaking children, proposed a stage model of multilingual socialization, and severally analyzed the problems of linguistic minorities in India.

Mohanty is the author of *Bilingualism in a Multilingual Society* (1994). He has co-edited *Psychology of Poverty and Social Disadvantage* (2000, with G. Misra), *Perspectives on Indigenous Psychology* (2002, with G. Misra), *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local* (2009), and *Social Justice through Multilingual Education* (2009), both with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, and Minati Panda. Currently he is writing a book on *The Other Side of Multilingualism*.

Mohanty is a fellow of the Association of Psychological Science, USA, and the National Academy of Psychology, India. He is a member of the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *Language Policy*, and *Psychological Studies*. He was president of the National Academy of Psychology, India, in 1997. He has undertaken several research projects funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands, and by Indian agencies like UGC, ICSSR, and NCERT. He also directs (with Minati Panda) the National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium (www.nmrc-jnu.org) sponsored by UNICEF. Currently he is collaborating with the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in the area of MLE. He has been a guest at the faculty of several universities in India, the USA, Canada, and Switzerland. Recently, he has organized symposia on aspects of multilingualism at the IAAP Congress at Melbourne (July 2010), AASP, Delhi (December 2009), and ICP, Berlin (July 2008). He has been keynote speaker at the 2010 ISSBD, Lusaka (July 2010), the International Conference on Globalization and Languages, Tokyo (August, 2008), the International Conference on Third Language Acquisition and Multilingualism, Stirling (2007), the International Conference on Language and Poverty, Cornell (2005), and IAAP, Madrid (1994).

Mohanty can use at least seven languages and writes newspaper columns, essays, and stories in Oriya.

SEE ALSO: Colonialism and Language Policy and Planning; Linguistic Imperialism; Mother-Tongue-Medium Education; Multilingual Education in India; National Language and English in India; Role of Linguistic Human Rights in Language Policy and Planning

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Suggested Readings

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