



## A. K. Mohanty (ed): *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages*

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This book is an account of my journey into the world of many languages, a journey in which I have progressively been prodded to partake views from the margins, to understand the dynamics and share the agony of linguistic discrimination and the disadvantages of the ITM (Indigenous-Tribal-Minority/Minoritised) communities in the multilingual world of cumulative neglect and regressive marginalisation (Mohanty, 2019, p. 3).

Ajit Mohanty's book, *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages* (2019), presents the thesis that multilingual societies should learn to live with languages in a way that is fair, just and humane to all. It highlights the urgency for linguistic social justice—a quest that has been notoriously elusive in contemporary societies. Mohanty focuses special attention on educational systems, particularly schools—which currently function as instruments for maintaining and widening social inequities; but, which conversely could also be imagined as sites for reform.

The flow of arguments is laid out clearly. Mohanty begins by explaining that a qualitative (rather than an additive) shift is needed to understand the nature of multilingualism, which is fundamentally different from Western ideas about bi- or trilingualism. Drawing upon his own experiences with growing up in multilingual India as well as from a range of multilingual societies, he argues that equal competence in different languages, or, “balanced bilingualism”—a central concept in Western studies of bilingualism—is not a criterion for success in multilingual societies where multiple languages work seamlessly

together to meet different functional needs in different spheres of life. In later chapters, he builds a strong case for the cognitive, personal and societal advantages of bilingualism—drawing upon an extensive body of research evidence generated in the West, and through his own extensive studies in tribal Odisha. These benefits are poignantly juxtaposed against what Annamalai (in his Afterword) refers to as a “multi-nodal” linguistic hierarchy operative in many post-colonial societies (including India), which views the multilingual resource as a burden and disenfranchises many. Mohanty proposes new conceptual terminology to characterise these power divides: the “double divide”—between English (the language of the colonisers) and the major regional languages on the one hand; and between the major regional languages and the ITM languages, on the other. Speakers of ITM languages find the functional spaces for using these languages to be rapidly shrinking, such that they survive, but do not thrive (characterised as the “vicious circle of language disadvantage” in which ITM languages are further impoverished through shrinking spaces for usage). Thus, the outcome of language contact in India is marginalisation—of the regional languages by English; and of the ITM languages by both English and the regional languages.

Poupeau, discussing Bourdieu's ideas about symbolic violence, has noted that most domination in advanced societies is symbolic rather than achieved by force and involves at least some sense of largely below-conscious complicity on the part of those subjugated, described as “misrecognition” in Bourdieu's terms (Poupeau, 2000, cited in James, 2015). Mohanty, likewise, notes that the double divide is maintained through the complicity and aspirations of people for acquiring the higher power language(s). Given the systemic hierarchy of languages, individuals tend to value instrumental (pragmatic), over integrative ends for language use, remaining content to use

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their own (lower power) language for intra-group communications. He presents two case studies—that of Kui (Odisha) and Bodo (Assam) to argue that the threshold between “language shift” (merely surviving) versus “assertive language maintenance” (thriving) may be determined by the presence of organised, collective action through group-level strategies, rather than individual choice.

After laying out these foundational ideas about language, mind and society in the first five chapters of the book, Mohanty shifts his attention explicitly to the role of education in maintaining (or potentially alleviating) the linguistic hierarchy in the next five chapters. Drawing upon Dreze and Sen (2002)’s capability theory, he argues that denying ITM children education in languages that they are proficient in leads to a shocking loss of capability by pushing them out at various levels of education. Mohanty comprehensively reviews and critiques various policies and pedagogical models that have failed to address linguistic hierarchies and the role of language-in-education, especially in post-colonial India, including the three-language formula. English is a key language of international and national domination (Phillipson, 2013) which leads to the shrinkage of functional spaces for the use of less powerful languages, and serves to maintain the double divide. Mohanty argues that it is necessary to relocate access to English within the framework of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTMLE).

This is a well-researched, well-articulated book for academics and practitioners working in the area of education in post-colonial and multilingual societies. It is also relevant for theorists and practitioners working in the West, whose ideas about bi- and multilingual education would be challenged and widened by exposure to the range of issues that Mohanty raises, issues that are backed by decades of detailed research conducted with different ITM populations in India, as well as the author’s personal biography as a citizen and scholar in a multilingual society. As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas notes in her Series Preface, “Other studies about MFL (Multilingualism as a First Language) are mostly not self-experienced from birth by the researchers....” (p. xiii). A strength of the book is that Mohanty has tried to scan a range of multilingual societies and multinational perspectives to show that the central tenets of the book—hierarchy, “double divide”, language disadvantage, marginalisation, and so on—are relevant to all multilingual societies, including India.

An erudite scholar, Mohanty uses a wide variety of theoretical lenses to explain pertinent issues, borrowing from a variety of disciplines (child development, cognition, linguistics, social psychology, economics, etc.) where such lenses are available, and creating new conceptual categories, where not. He supports his arguments by drawing

upon decades of empirical research—his own and those of others; as well as from his experiences with designing educational interventions in the field, and with policy-making. Thus, it is an interesting mixture of narrative, description, analysis and synthesis.

A strong and clear plea for justice, human rights and equity of educational opportunities flows throughout the book, leaving the reader in no doubt about the author’s deep concern and empathy for the people he works with. The book articulates a vision for an emancipatory education for the weakest amongst us. Mohanty argues that multilingual education must do more than help the marginalised to negotiate or circumvent the language barrier or the double divide; it must *challenge* the double divide and serve as a *resistance programme* to it. To redefine the purpose of multilingual education as more than bridge programmes to the dominant languages, but as a means for human flourishing is a strong demand for social justice of an order that the African American educator, Lisa Delpit would approve of:

“The purpose of education is to learn to die satiated with life.” That, I believe, is what we need to bring to our schools: experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied (Delpit, 2006, p. 104, citing the Yupik Eskimo scientist, Oscar Kwageley).

At no point does Mohanty argue for denying access to the language(s) of power—be they the regional languages or English. For, as Phillipson (2013) notes, “...It is logical that people in many countries wish to develop competence in English, but in many postcolonial countries this entails subtractive learning” (p. 5). Mohanty’s preferred solution to this quandary is to provide students with MTMLE—a model that his team of colleagues has tried out with success in a few tribal villages in Odisha.

While Mohanty is very thorough in his critique of the policies for language-in-education and quite consistent in his vision and demand for MTMLE, the book perhaps has the weakness of preaching to the choir. People who share Mohanty’s vision for social justice will find that this book provides evidence for all that they believe in and aspire for, perhaps giving them the words and the data to argue for MTMLE. But, what of other categories of potential readers—say, an interested, but uncertain policy-maker? This kind of a reader may need clearer suggestions for what alternative policies might look like in practice, suggestions that are currently tenuous or insufficiently articulated.



Drawing upon case studies from other countries that have successfully designed multilingual policies to rejuvenate marginalised languages, or providing information on circumventing anticipated pitfalls in conceptualising and implementing alternative policies in India might have lent greater clarity to the issues. Yet another category of reader—an interested, but inexperienced educator—would have benefitted from pointers on how one can provide critical access to languages of dominance (e.g. English) without further marginalising the ITM—the “access paradox” of English language education (Lodge, 1997, in Janks, 2004). Even a mother tongue-based multilingual pedagogy is not necessarily sufficient to circumvent marginalisation without consciously creating openings for creative resistance in the curriculum or pedagogy. Mohanty could have drawn from his (or other) studies to demonstrate how access without acquiescence could be designed for.

Drawing upon case studies from other parts of the multilingual world could have also strengthened other arguments that Mohanty makes—for example the link between MTMLE and economic development—does providing language education in ITM languages turn anything around in terms of broader socio-economic indicators for these groups? Documentation conducted by others could have been used to support and elaborate on the arguments that he proposes for the conditions under which linguistic rejuvenation takes place. The implications of this last point for education could have been fleshed out a little more clearly, since education as a site for potential linguistic justice is a theme that runs through the book. These gaps are openings for research agendas that others can and should take forward.

Readers should be alert to a conceptual ambiguity that warrants closer examination and rethinking. Mohanty moves from convincing the reader in the early part of the book that the nature of multilingualism is fundamentally different from that of Western bilingualism by virtue of its not being measurable by equal competence levels in the known languages, but, by an overall functional competence. Yet, in successive chapters, Mohanty appears to leave this *laissez-faire* approach to multilingual competence behind. He draws almost exclusively from studies of balanced bilinguals (his own as well as other Western studies) in making his arguments for the cognitive benefits of multilingualism in Chapter 3, suggesting that a certain level of competence *is* required in multiple languages. In critiquing both policies and weak models of multilingual education in later chapters, he takes issue with them for not

paying attention to developing a certain level of competence in more than the dominant languages, leaving the reader with a dilemma to resolve—do competence levels matter in multilingual societies, or don't they? Perhaps these two perspectives are not theoretically incompatible with each other. While functional multilingualism of the kind that Mohanty describes in the early chapters may be sufficient for characterising informal exchanges in the community, they may be quite inadequate for more formal educational and occupational spaces in modern economies and societies. If so, there is a need for articulating what models of balanced multilingualism might look like in multilingual educational contexts; it is possible that Western models of balanced bilingualism may have more relevance to this conversation than is currently indicated.

Overall, this book is highly recommended to the interested reader. It is a book that painstakingly describes injustice, but also equally describes hope. As Jim Cummins concludes in his foreword, “...this immensely engaging, authoritative and compelling book provides an empirical and moral foundation upon which educators, researchers and other social actors can build dialogical spaces to facilitate communication and information-sharing both with marginalised communities and with policy-makers” (p. xxi).

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