



The Politics of Language

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Abstract

Language is an important identity marker, which gets exploited by the political elite or vested interests for communal gains. This essay show how language and politics are intertwined and constitute and shape each other, considering why it is important to make sense of the politics of language. It discusses the case of linguistic reorganisation of states in India, by exploring how the idea of nation and nation-building is predicated on the conception of homogeneity, which is enforced by the political recognition of one language as ‘official’ language.

Keywords: Language, Power, Nation, Linguistic Reorganisation, Politics

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I

This paper attempts to interrogate the significance of language in politics and to examine how politics is constituted and also reconstitutes the form of language we use as social beings. As the evidence suggests, the power of language is perceptible through the various events that unfold on the political stage, sometimes in a constructive way and also at many times, through its very peculiar devastating consequences.

My purpose here is to broadly delineate how language is an important signifier politically. I also discuss why is it that we have to account for the politics of language.



II

In the independent India the politics of language may be understood in at least three senses, and they are not mutually exclusive, rather they inform each other. First, language has been understood to be a powerful emotive connect for creating or re-organising the states. The first State's Reorganisation Committee(SRC) agreed upon the formula of linguistic states, and this is how Andhra Pradesh came into existence.¹ Second, the list of languages in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution has been expanding. It stood at 15 when the Constitution was promulgated; it is 22 since 2003.² Would it mean that these new languages did not enjoy power prior to their recognition by the state? Or, alternatively, does the constitutional status bestowed upon them make them anymore powerful?

Three, the trend of violence resulting from the fear that one language may be swamped by the language which is spoken by many may be easily noticed. The MNS backed reactionary violence against the Hindi speaking people of North India, mainly from Bihar and UP, is a case in the point. The state assembly of Maharashtra witnessed ugly scenes when newly-elected MLAs of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) attacked Samajwadi Party's Abu Azmi for taking the oath of office and secrecy in Hindi, since MNS chief Raj Thackeray had warned the newly elected legislators, asking them to take oath only in Marathi.

What is important for us is to note that state's recognition of one language is a subject of pride for some, and a matter of resentment for another. Incidentally both Hindi and Marathi figured in the Eight Schedule of the Constitution originally, and the debate over the

¹ The regional languages built the case for assertion and linguistic reorganisation ever since independence, and this phenomenon can be traced to the pre-independence period, when the principle of linguistic reorganisation was accepted by the Congress in 1917, organising its regional branches along these lines by 1921. In 1948 a commission was set up to look into the desirability of linguistic provinces, with S K Dar as Chairperson. The States Reorganisation Commission(SRC), formed by J L Nehru in 1953, submitted its report in 1956, providing for 14 states and 6 centrally administered territories. By 1958 G B Pant declared that regional languages should be supreme in administration, commerce, law and education. See Papiya Ghosh, 'Politics of Language & Culture in Bihar: Introductory Views', 2006, accessed online on 1 February 2011, www.papiyaghosh.com.

² India is believed to have 1652 languages which people identify as their mother tongues. The officially recognized languages are 22, and mentioned in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. The Schedule originally contained 15 languages as follows: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and Sindhi. By the 71st Amendment of 1992, Konkani, Manipuri and Nepali were added to the list. In 2003, four more languages, were added: Bodo, Maithili, Dogri and Santhali.



official language of India saw confrontation by Tamil speaking people. What then is the source of power for a language? Is it there in the language itself, so that whoever speaks a powerful language, becomes powerful himself? It seems unlikely though.

III

Anupam Kher, an actor, remarked in the *Times of India*, that the human beings invented language to complain to each other. Well, this may not be true at all. For instance, the research has only indicated(it is yet to be confirmed) that animals possess the capacity of the using language to communicate. Also if a pet dog has to complain to his master, it does so without the use of language. Among the human beings, it is even easier, as a simple facial expression may convey one's unhappiness to the source of the irritation.

The unique capacity of human beings to communicate through language has been widely accepted. But the relation between the communication and language (meaning we need language to communicate with so and so) is very contentious. In 'The Politics of Language and the concept of Linguistic Identity', K Rajagopalan says that one does not need the knowledge of ancient history to discover that social bonds, including the recent forms such as nation and nationalism, are intuitive, and forged out of the sense of sameness with the other. The fact that we can understand what our neighbour suggests that we can posit a common language between us, therefore, having a common language cannot be a necessary condition for communication. Rather, it is the feeling that we can manage to communicate with the people around us somehow, make us think about a common language. Any language requires for its existence a community of speakers who can understand one another. The meaning becomes important therefore for the receiver, which also determines the kind of feedback the speaker gets. These factors require to be synced for any understanding to happen. The language works with beliefs, morality, customs and practices for conveying meaning. Should this mean that the people speaking and understanding a particular language and therefore belonging to a particular culture isolate themselves, and conceive of a social existence excluding the other groups who speak and understand a different language?

Languages have formed loyalties in the past and often served tools for rallying people, and this continues even today. The ancient Greeks developed their sense identity by observing how they were different from the Barbarians, who were so called because their speech



sounded so un-Greek – and gibberish for Greek ears. The difference of speech between groups defined their ethnic identity, and this way of perceiving one’s identity may also be seen attached with the concepts of nation and nationality.

The concepts of nation and nationality, which originated in the post-Renaissance Europe, got their modern meaning in the 19th century, when colonialism brought together large tracts of foreign land under the geo-political subjugation of Europe. The idea of nation became closely connected with the concept of a language, which was summed up in the ‘One nation, one people, one language’ slogan. The echoes of this slogan can be felt even today, since our lives are primarily organised around the idea of nation, which came to be understood as a homogeneous entity, often having one national or official language to assert that sense of homogeneity.

IV

When we discuss the term politics of language, we are talking about the form in which the state recognises it, and we mostly connote the fact that the language which has the backing of the state can express some authority. For instance, take the issue of pride involved in speaking the national language. This would be a very curious case. Hindi and Marathi were both recognised as languages in the Eight Schedule in the Constitution. But granting Hindi a status of official language made Hindi a national language, whereas for all practical purposes, Marathi continued to be a regional language.

The state’s patronage may, therefore, affect the status of a language in the following ways.

- (a) The recognition of a language as an official language may suggest the power and prestige that the speakers of the language would enjoy. All official documents are published in languages that are ‘official’, which are recognised in a court of law also.
- (b) If there are more than one main language, political decisions may imply promoting one group of speakers over another.



- (c) The politics of language relates to dialects also. Some speakers of a dialect may be perceived as speaking an ‘advanced’ or ‘correct’ form of the language, which may be appropriated for designing communication of the government.

In his book *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India*, Paul R Brass has discussed the ways in which language and religion have been manipulated by the political elite for communal movements. He has shown that the perceived group identity does not determine the communal movements’ outcomes, rather get altered by them. Also, in the formation of group identities, political elites seem to emphasize one symbol or line of cleavage above others, and try to merge all other symbols with it. And, political parties actively shape group view by manipulating the identity markers, for the benefit of their own group.

Asha Sarangi’s edited volume, *Language and Politics in India* (2009) contextualizes the theme of language and politics, showing overlaps between power and culture. The language question is not seen as simply one of communication, rather the emphasis is on the overlapping hierarchies which language gives rise to, generating identity politics centred around the politics of language.

V

The strong sentiments expressed in the name of protection and promotion of the regional languages is not new in India. In 1920, the Congress agreed on the language principle for reorganizing its provincial units, which was realized in 1921. The Congress took a series of measures in 1927, 1928, 1938 and again in 1946, by which the reorganization of provinces along language lines in the entire country took place.³ In a linguistically plural society like India, it posed several problems for ‘nation building’, which was sought to be achieved by having one national language for the entire country.

To conclude, I suggest that it is important for us to understand the politics of language, not because we need to agree or disagree whether language themselves have power

³ See Jyotindra Dasgupta “India’s Federal Design and National Reconstruction” in Atul Kohli(ed.), *The Success of India’s Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.52.



or not, rather very often power is expressed and exercised through the use or abuse of language. The idea that languages can be source of homogeneity is problematic, which we can see in the case of India, especially in the context of the project of nation-building. What is important for collective existence is to recognise that people observe diversity of linguistic and cultural practices, and that they should be allowed to do so, within their groups and outside both.

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