
LANDMARK

Multilingualism, Mother Tongue and MLE

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Abstract

Contrasted with the dominant monolingual societies, multilingual societies are characterized by natural use of overlapping languages with fluid boundaries. Multilingual socialization and development of multilingual communicative repertoire endow children with cognitive advantages. Mother tongue (MT) as language of identity and dominant medium of thinking is of significance in multilingual education (MLE) which is based on the distinction between basic interpersonal communication skill (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and the linguistic interdependence hypothesis in the theory of Bilingual Education (BE). Applications of MLE, with focus on Odisha, are discussed pointing to issues in uncritical extension of BE to MLE.

Keywords: Multilingualism, mother tongue, multilingual education, bilingual education, MLE policy

What is Multilingualism?

Use of many languages in societies across the globalized world is increasingly common. However, despite the presence of multiple languages, many societies are characterized by a dominant monolingual orientation. In such societies, the dominant language is most widely used, accepted as unmarked, and other languages remain isolated to specific and marked social contexts. In the US, for example, English is the sole language of use in common social contexts and other languages (e.g. Spanish, Navaho, Hindi, Gujarati, etc.) are used in specific domains usually among the linguistic minorities.

In contrast, in multilingual societies like India, language users move naturally and spontaneously (and often, without any conscious

awareness) between languages with overlapping and fluid boundaries. Moving across linguistic boundaries is usually not viewed as infringements. Multilinguals' competence in using different languages as communicative tools does not remain static across domains; it may be functional to predominantly use one language in one situation and a different language in another. Multilingualism can be defined as "the ability of communities or persons to meet the communicative requirements of themselves and their society in normal daily life in two or more languages in their interaction with speakers of any of these languages" (Mohanty, 2019, p. 17).

Exposure to the socio-linguistic complexities of multilingual societies and the experience of the linguistic diversity endow children with special challenges of dealing with the nuances of multilingual communication. It calls for greater cognitive effort and leads to cognitive advantages (see Mohanty, 2019 for a review). Languages are resources, not burdens, in multilingual societies. Multilinguals have been shown to be more intelligent and creative with better executive control in cognitive activities, better metalinguistic awareness and appreciation of languages and linguistic diversity. Large-scale evidence from primary school children in India shows multilingual superiority in cognitive tasks including working memory and fluid intelligence (Tsimpli et al., 2020 a, b <https://www.mam.mml.cam.ac.uk/Con/Conjuly18/all-presentations/Projectfullreport>).

Education in India, as the NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020) points out, needs to promote multilingualism since, besides the cognitive advantages, India is a multilingual country and children need to be competent in the Mother Tongue (MT), regional and national level languages and English as well as other languages of functional significance. In a globalizing economy, multilingualism is an added advantage in education, corporate world, business, media, tourism, and other public sectors.

However, before going into the processes of promoting multilingual competence through MT-based multilingual education it is necessary to examine the notion of MT vis-à-vis other languages in our society.

Conceptualizing Mother Tongue in a Multilingual Society

Children, growing up in a society where multilingualism is the norm,

encounter 'concentric layers of societal multilingualism' (Mohanty, 2006: 263) early in development; their domains of social interaction become increasingly broader and varied. Fluid layers of languages are nested onto each other as a child moves from the zone of immediate family/neighbourhood communication to the wider local and regional communication and to more complex multilingual zones such as a marketplace. For a child, home language is an experienced variety or language(s) used in the family, whereas MT is a generic term for a common mutually intelligible form of language across families, neighbourhood, and regions. In her socio-linguistic survey, Panda (2018, 2019 a, b) shows that when tribal parents and school children in a multi-state, multilingual border area are asked to identify their MT they named one language as "our tribal language" (*hamārā ādivāsi bhāsā*) or "home language" (*ghar kā bhāsā*) and 30 per cent of these rural tribal homes used more than one language.

MT encompasses all forms/varieties of home languages used by the communities in a region or local area. There are local variations of codes/varieties/dialects, but, despite such variations, MT is characterized by mutual intelligibility among all the speakers who perceive the MT as a language of identity. MTs are "not linguistic categories; they are community ascriptions" (Mohanty, 2023, p. 58). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) points to five criteria of identifying MT: the first language to which a child is exposed (Origin), language one identifies with (Internal Identification), language one is identified with by others (External Identification), language one knows best (Competence) and language one uses most (Functional). These criteria imply that a person can have multiple MTs and that one's MT can change across time and context. Self-identification of one's language(s), language users' competence and identity are significant parameters in defining MT. In practical terms, MT is the language or the total communicative repertoire usually acquired early in development, the language in which children are most competent and the language they usually identify with.

There is a set of very influential voices which find the notion of MT problematic (Agnihotri, 2014 among others) at philosophical, ontological and linguistic levels. Pointing to how MT has been misused in classrooms to ignore and invisibilize "the languages and cultural practices children bring to school", Agnihotri (2014, p. 368) has projected the notion of *multilinguality* "as constitutive of being human" (2009,

2014). Multilinguality “implies that the boundaries we construct between different languages are artificial and often socio-politically motivated, but in practice, language boundaries are porous and languages flow effortlessly into each other” (Agnihotri, 2014, p. 369). This view is related to the growing denial of the constructs of *a language* and multilingualism and to the view of languages as social constructs and non-entities.

The idea of multilinguality is a powerful one with significant implications. Languages are social constructs. But, characterizing languages as invented categories is unfair to the language communities whose identities are deeply intertwined with their struggles, not only for rights to their land, forests, traditions, intellectual property, but also to their languages, their voices. It is true that communities’ languages are not clearly divided as bounded categories, but to use this fluidity to accept the knowledge of their language while denying their self-ascription of the language name they have been using over generations in their recalled history makes little sense. Our work with tribal communities in Odisha (Panda & Mohanty, 2011) on their community’s oral history shows that these communities have historically distinguished themselves in terms of their language names.

The suggestion that the concepts of language, MT or multilingualism do not reflect the way languages are used and understood ignores the mental state of the language users, their self-construal as users of a language or MT or as multilingual. The extant notions of language, MT and multilingualism may have been misused to discriminate against certain groups or languages, but rejection of these notions (rather than of their misuse) is not a solution towards just social practices. The theoretical-philosophical underpinnings of these concepts will continue to be debated. But MTs need to be accepted as psychological realities (they also have clear neurological bases). True that each of these is a fluid category but, they are also fluidly used by the language users who are not completely oblivious of the inherent fluidity because that is how they transact socially across varying contexts in their daily routine life. Underneath the “squishiness” of languages, languaging, multilingualism there are anchor beliefs of speakers/communities in their own language(s); denial of this mental state or belief system in any theoretical discourse amounts to denial of social justice. It is important, as Agnihotri rightly argues, to recognize the multilinguality within a child (or in a classroom) and try to make resourceful use of

such multilinguality. However, in order to do so, it is not necessary to deny their language(s), their MT. Similarly, the claimed primacy of *multilanguaging* or *multilingua francas* (Makoni & Pennycook, 2012) over their root term “multilanguage/multilingualism” does not lead to any significant practical insights. Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas (2010) refer to the philosophical debate about whether languages and MTs are imagined or “invented” categories and suggest that the debate has minimal practical relevance for access to quality education (p. xiv). In his review of the proposition that languages and MTs do not exist as legitimate entities, Cummins (2021) points out that there is no “social or educational benefits associated with this proposition” (p. 149).

The notion of *multilinguality* draws our attention to the limitations of treating MTs as sets of discrete monolingual skills and the need to view MT as a totality of language users’ communicative repertoire in multilingual societies. Our studies on multilingual socialization (see Mohanty, 2023; Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2022, for discussion of the processes and stages of multilingual socialization based on studies in India) show that, children “progressively learn to engage effectively in multilingual communication in routine daily life activities and a variety of socio-linguistic contexts in which languages function as interrelated and overlapping systems constituting a composite set of tools complementing each other and forming a synergistic network to make communicative acts more effective. At the same time, languages are differentiated for pragmatic purposes of normative social communication and become gradually associated with users’ identities and self-construals (Singh, 2022)”. Thus, the notion of MT as a composite communicative repertoire needs to be aligned to the development of what has been characterized (Mohanty, 2023) as multilingualism as a first language (MFL).

Mother Tongue and Education

Children’s knowledge/understanding of or thinking about the world around is primarily developed/encoded in their MT which has a critical role in education. MT is the medium of children’s thinking; it is the language in which they learn most effectively (NEP 2020: Section 4.9). MT, the medium of children’s thinking, needs to be the choice for the medium of instruction (MoI) or the language of early teaching-learning. For formal education, it is pragmatic to identify children’s MT on the basis of their competence. It is also pedagogically significant to treat

MT as a composite set of tools constituting children's communicative repertoire. While focus on a given MT or language in designing textbooks and preparation of other Teaching-Learning Materials is conventional, it is important to recognize that use of multilingual modes of communication is a normal classroom process in India (see Tsimpli et al., 2020a MultiLila Project in India; <https://www.mam.mml.cam.ac.uk/Con/Conjuly18/all-presentations/Projectfullreport>; Tsimpli et al., 2019, 2020a). Children's multilingualism and classroom linguistic diversity are pedagogic resources and, therefore, effective education and language learning requires multilingual pedagogic strategies with emphasis on affirmation of children's identities.

Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MLE): Basic Principles

Schooling in dominant languages amounts to the denial of Linguistic Human Rights and equality of educational opportunities; it also subverts the natural multilingualism of children with detrimental consequences for maintenance of their MTs (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2022). MT-based multilingual education (MLE) is widely accepted as an effective approach to children's education. Basically, the MLE approach suggests formal school learning and literacy development in MT before targeting development of a second and other languages. MLE involves early teaching-learning (instruction) in the MT-medium and gradual introduction of other languages as school subjects and then as medium of instruction (MoI). MLE is defined as a system of quality education using "two or more languages (including Sign languages) as media of instruction in subjects other than the languages themselves and with (high levels of) multilingualism and, preferably, multiliteracy, as a goal at the end of formal schooling" (Mohanty et al., 2009, p. xvii).

In their applications across the world, MLE programmes are based on the theory and psycho-linguistic principles of Bilingual Education (BE) (Cummins, 1979, 1984, 2009, 2021 etc.) with some cultural/contextual variations. BE/MLE is based on two empirically supported central notions: a two-level distinction in language proficiency and Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis. Language proficiency is seen as having two interrelated aspects—Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS involves simple social communication skills developing spontaneously with children's growing conversational fluency, reaching a plateau

around the age of 6. Development of CALP is slower beginning around the age of school entry. CALP continues to develop throughout the school years and beyond with formal learning experiences and active literacy engagement (in schooling as well as other face-to-face interactions). BICS enables children to engage socially through developmentally appropriate communication. CALP enable effective thinking and problem-solving activities through purposeful use of language(s) for reflection and cognitive processes; specifically, CALP involves meta-cognitive reflections such as thinking about language. When children are subjected to formal schooling and literacy instruction they have adequate social communication skills in their MT. The formal experience of school learning enables use of language not just for social communication *through* language, but also to think *about* language, to engage in metalinguistic/metacognitive reflections, to make language the object of thought and a tool to regulate thinking, problem solving, creativity and other cognitive activities. Children's early family- and peer group-interactions involve simple, immediate, context-embedded, cognitively less demanding here-and-now communication (e.g. *get me that water bottle*). In contrast, formal and abstract learning situations, such as in schools, involve cognitively more demanding, abstract and context-reduced use of language(s) (e.g. *Make a sentence with the word 'cloud' or Which number comes after five?*). Classroom learning involves using language as object of thought, reflecting on text and meaning (as in reading), regulating thinking for effective problem solving (e.g. mathematical reasoning) and creative activities, and for cross-linguistic reflections necessary, in particular, for learning and literacy development in a non-MT language. BICS and CALP are not unrelated or independent skills; a minimum level of development of BICS is necessary for development of CALP. Development of BICS also involves a minimal level of application of CALP. They can be viewed as different *registers* (Cummins, 2021) associated with different types of linguistic activities. The distinction is used to justify the need for continued development of MT through formal schooling for effective academic learning and learning in one or more non-MT language(s). Children's readiness for learning and literacy development in a second language, L2, awaits a minimum level of development of CALP, ideally over a period of 5 to 8 years of effective school learning in MT or L1.

Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis rests on the empirically validated

assertion that, instead of being separate or language-specific, underlying language proficiency is common across languages of a bilingual/multilingual. This implies that, when CALP in MT is well developed, it gets easily transferred to other language(s) and, therefore, early learning and development of the MT (L1) comes at no cost to the development of school learning in L2. Developed proficiency (both BICS and CALP) in MT and the positive transfer across languages facilitate development of L2 proficiency, according to Cummins (2009, p. 15):

To the extent that instruction in L_x is effective in promoting proficiency in L_x , transfer of this proficiency to L_y will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L_y (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L_y .

MLE in multilingual societies provides an alternative to submersion education of linguistic minorities in a dominant language. BE/MLE for education of linguistic minorities in dominant monolingual societies beginning early education and literacy development in the minority MT before adding a second or the dominant language have been found to be effective (Mohanty et al., 2009; Mohanty, 2019). It has also been successfully used for education of majority language children in a second language.

Effectiveness of MLE Programmes

In general, MLE programmes have been successful in promoting better academic achievement and school learning of MT as well as other languages particularly for Indigenous Tribal Minority (ITM) children in multilingual societies (see Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Mohanty et al. 2009; Mohanty, 2019). Most of the programmes have been early transitional programmes in which MT as MoI is replaced by the dominant language in 3 to 4 years. However, these programmes are found to be better than the submersion programmes beginning in a dominant language. I will briefly discuss some MLE initiatives in India with focus on Odisha (with which I am more familiar).

In 2004, Andhra Pradesh launched MT-based MLE for primary grades in eight tribal languages in 1,000 schools. The programme was successful in enhancing classroom achievement and participation compared to the dominant language (Telugu) medium schools (Mohanty et al., 2009). However, with bifurcation of the state, the MLE programmes in the

eight tribal MTs were dropped in both the new states (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) without any formal announcement and the MT-based MLE schools were converted to English-medium schools (Biswabandan, 2020).

In 2006-07 Odisha launched the MT-based MLE programme in 10 tribal languages in 195 Primary Schools. Tribal MT was the MoI for teaching-learning of all subjects from Grade 1 to Grade 3 and for Environmental Studies and Science in Grades 4 and 5; MT was also a language subject from Grade 1 to 5. Odia was taught as a second language subject in Grades 2 to 5 and used as MoI for teaching-learning of Mathematics in Grades 4 and 5. English was taught as the third language subject from Grade 3. The Odisha Programme received some international attention and it influenced MLE policy and practice in Nepal (Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty, 2009/2020). Several evaluations of Odisha MLE (NCERT, 2011; Panda & Mohanty, 2011, 2013, Panda et al., 2011) show significant positive impact on children's classroom achievement, participation and attendance, community perception and involvement, and teacher attitudes.

The initial success of the MLE programme led to MT-based pre-primary education in Odisha and also to a state policy of MLE for tribal children. The Government of Odisha and OPEPA set up an Expert Committee (with this author as the Chair) in 2013-14 to prepare MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines (Mohanty et al., 2014) for Odisha. The Policy Recommendations were accepted by the Government of Odisha with a formal Gazette Notification of the Odisha MLE Policy on 1 July, 2014 (see <http://www.odisha.gov.in/schooleducation/resolution/2014/14118>) which sought to deal with the issues in implementation of MLE and the need to extend the programme to all tribal children and languages in the state. Odisha is the first state in India to have a language-in-education policy for tribal children.

The Odisha MLE programme is now implemented in 21 languages in 1,485 primary schools. About 520 new schools have also been identified for the programme. The programme has a teaching staff of 3,440 MLE Siksha Sahayaks and 252 MLE Language Instructors from the target language communities and, out of them, 2,716 MLE Siksha Sahayaks have been trained with an Induction Training Module on MLE (called *Samrudhi*) developed for the programme. Curricular Framework, Textbooks and transactional materials have been developed in 21 tribal

languages and, except for Santali language materials written in *Ol-Chiki* script, the tribal languages are written in Odia script.

MLE programmes in different forms are also initiated in a number of other states in India including Chhattisgarh, Assam, and Jharkhand. With the NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020) emphasizing MT-based education for multilingualism one can expect wider application of MLE in the country.

Conclusion

Despite some demonstrated success of the MLE programmes, there are conceptual and practical issues in uncritically extending the theory of BE to MLE in multilingual societies including India (Mohanty 2021, 2023). The developmental trajectories of BIC and CALP as projected in the BE theory are likely to be different in multilingual societies because of early exposure to multiple languages and childhood multilingualism (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2022). Our multilingual socialization studies show that 3-to-4-year-olds in India have high levels of abstract awareness of languages—identifying, for example, similarities and differences between multiple languages (Mohanty, 2019). Further, in multilingual contexts, cross-linguistic transfer need not necessarily wait for formal schooling experience; neurolinguistics studies show such transfer in illiterate adults. Mutual transfer of knowledge across languages is as natural and spontaneous in multilingual societies as switching between them. Languages are not isolated from each other, nor are they discrete entities. In fact, awareness of languages and cross-linguistic reflections and transfer are integral processes in children’s learning to communicate and their multilingual socialization. Thus, the possibility of introducing multiple languages earlier than suggested in BE theory needs to be empirically examined. Further, MT need not to be viewed as a “bridge” for education in a second or target language; the languages are already interrelated. This calls for a rethinking of the basic tenets of BE as applied to MLE in multilingual societies. Lastly, MLE need not be construed as a model for education of ITM communities only; NEP 2020 is to be seen as a policy of MLE for all.

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