

Language, Identity and Contemporary Society
(2nd edition)

Rajesh Kumar and Om Prakash (eds) (2019)

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Language, Identity and Contemporary Society was published early in 2019 and focuses on the analysis of language and identity in modern society. Unlike some previous studies whose scope was limited to a given region (Gubbins and Holt, 2002), this book broadens its context of study to include Asia, Africa and America. The book consists of 15 chapters, including the introduction, and a list of contributors. While 10 of the 14 papers have India as their context of research, the remaining four studies were carried out in Hawaii, Japan, Kenya and South Africa. They all attempt to address topics relating to language and identity in present-day society. They raise issues that constitute exciting opportunities and offer study avenues researchers can take up for further inquiry. The burning issue of CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill) and the risk of theocratic governance that it poses in India is one of the areas that some of the 10 papers focusing on this country pointed at with regard to language, faith, identity and politics which is still fertile ground for research in this field.

In Chapter 1, Rajesh Kumar and Om Prakash set the scene by delineating the scope of the volume and summarising the contributions. Drawing on theoreticians on social identity theory, they postulate the social dimension of identity as relating to group membership and the personal dimension as referring to the 'unique

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attributes and factors that create a distinct individual' (p. 1). They underscore the intricacy of language, identity and culture in shaping individuals and determining belonging but acknowledge globalisation overture as reconfiguring identity in a linguistically digitalised world with 'dissolving linguistic boundaries' (p. 2), thus the imperative of linguistic glocalisation (Crystal, 2003:22) in order to 'capture the changing patterns and reformulations of multiple identities in a set of globalised, digitalised, and hyper-mobile societies' (p. 3).

In Chapter 2, S. Imtiaz Hasnain examines how the Hindi-Urdu controversy has instantiated an indexical order made relevant by writing forms that translate the dichotomies Hindi: Urdu = Hindu: Muslim. This is what King (2001) refers to as 'the poisonous potency of script', where variants of the same language characterised by extreme digraphia draw on two script forms: Devanagari for Hindi which is written from left to right and a Persian modification of the Arabic script for Urdu, which is written from right to left to actualise faith, reify it and use it to fuel animosity between Muslims and Hindus and for political ferment (see Vaishnav, 2019a). Hasnain, however, points out that these two dialects of Hindustani are found in a shared domain of linguistic and literary space and cultural syncretism, and demonstrates how *linguaging* and discursive practices are employed to develop the language of the masses for communicating a message of peace and harmony across religious and cultural boundaries.

In Chapter 3, Asharf Bhatt and Rakesh M. Bhatt highlight identity negotiation in the Kashmir region, which is fraught with linguistic tension triggered by speech community members' perception and representation of the Kashmiri's script/s from an ideological perspective with religious underpinnings. According to Vaishnav (2019b:15), tensions fuelled by religious nationalism in Jammu and Kashmir were rife back in 1983 when Indira Gandhi gave franchise (motivated by political gains in the run-up to assembly elections in the region), through a resettlement bill, to former Hindu residents who have moved to Pakistan to come back and continue living in the area (see also Varshney, 1993). Like in the case of Hindi-Urdu, the authors dread a situation where Kashmiri, a long-standing binding force between Muslim and Hindu, could become divisive in the coding and decoding of its script/s.

In Chapter 4, the argument raised in Chapter 1 is again underscored by Pritha Chandra for whom Hindi-Urdu is one and the same language and is perceived as such by contemporary South Asian linguists. Chandra argues that Urdu is not a minority language and making it an official language marginalises and separates Urdu from its varieties and lineage. According to her, Urdu literacy and education advocacy has not addressed perennial problems plaguing the language. If

Hindi-Urdu was to obtain its rightful place in the linguistic domain, these problems should be resolved. She suggests measures, which, if properly implemented and supported by state and non-state agencies, would set things right.

Language is a marker of identity, and often a language variety or ways of speaking profile a speaker. In Chapter 5, Abhishek Kashyap argues that social status is embedded in the linguistic structure of the Bajjika language and makes relevant the speaker's social identity. Hierarchy in the social organisation of the Bajjika community is translated into social identity in discourse, which is shaped by factors such as caste, economic class, level of education, profession, rank, seniority, and kinship status. This corresponds to the perception by Koller (2009) of social actors as a discourse analytical category who, through the text, instantiate models of the self and others, both individual and collective. Social stratification mirrors a highly calibrated system of honorifics integrated into the pronominal system and the system of verbal agreements: speakers of Bajjika carefully select agreement markers in the verb to index their social status and that of the addressee or a third person referent.

Cuisine is part of the identity marker of a people. B. N. Patnaik upholds in Chapter 6 that in Odia, the combination of *pakhala* and *rasagola*, two food products, with the Jagannath culture and the Odia language instantiate Odia identity (see also Patnaik, 2015). The Jagannath 'consciousness' imbued with spirituality is viewed by the authors as above the social and the collective and far from being a cult. Patnaik draws on an episode of the *Sarala Mahabharata* which described a city called *Babarapuri* where values are topsy-turvy as an illustration of ascribed identity. This ascription of the city's name comes from Babara, believed to be a colloquial term in Odia and in its tatsamic (Sanskrit) form means 'uncivilized'. The *Babarapuri* categorisation of the city is the handiwork of the outsider as no insider would have vilified the city's values upheld by its denizens. While the four symbols of Odia identity examined in the paper have been from an insider's perspective, there is, however, potential convergence of insider's and outsider's views regarding the Jagannath culture and the Odia language. The confluence of the insider/outsider perspective is also noted with the dish *pakhala* while appearing unlikely with *rasagola*. Convergence strengthens the identity marker whereas divergence does not weaken it nor constitute a cause for concern.

Folk narratives in many cultures are a source of gender categorisation that could be revealingly sexist. Examining the folk songs of eastern Uttar Pradesh in Chapter 7, Neena Pandey unveils a systemic formulation of women's images and gender identity construction through these melodies. These songs recount women's ascribed roles and the expected way they should be performed in a society where values are upheld through representational imagery by community

members. Cultural representation has been essential in the creation of tropes about women in many societies and epitomises their universal categorisation as inferior. Folk songs translate power relations in a patriarchal society and portray the perception of the powerless by the powerful. This is also the view held by Jassal (2012), who argues that folk songs are vehicles for the construction and reproduction of gender identity and play a role in the maintenance and internalisation of inequality in women's lives. It is therefore essential to deconstruct derogatory images of women depicted in folk songs and promote those that are gender-equal and humanistic. Such promotion considers the creation of new songs designed at building a sane and gender-equal society and fostering therein a creative space for its development. This is a long-term project engaging village communities who tap into the power of collective tunes to reshape popular mindsets and initiate positive change.

The use of European languages as official languages in multilingual contexts other than Europe has always been debatable, as this is viewed by some people as the perpetuation of colonialism via the imposition of alien languages and, consequently, of the cultures that they mediate. Arguing about national language and identity in the context of India, Anjani Kumar Sinha upholds, in Chapter 8, English as being a language of national identity for educated Indians. Embracing this view makes it possible for literate Indians to accept English and Hindi as languages of national identity while the argument pitting Hindi against other Indian languages is circumvented just as the one about English versus Hindi is presently redundant.

In Chapter 9, Peter L. Barasa and Carolyn Omulando grapple with issues of emergent identities in the context of Africa and the impact of language learning and culture on pedagogy. Anchoring their research in Kenya and South Africa, the authors suggest an analytical and interpretative approach to the notions of language, identity and society and call for reflection on classroom language teaching that transcends cultural essentialism, a perspective also explored by Zilliacus, Paulsrud and Holm (2017) and Bradley (2018) in their studies. The views presented in the contribution seek to go beyond a determinist and fixed description of culture as disseminated by mainstream cultural, theoretical and applied linguistics circles. It is the authors' view that the African of the twenty-first century should embrace a new identity that embeds both indigenous and international languages.

Translanguaging is a natural phenomenon in multilingual locations. However, definitive quick-fix language policies in those contexts have often reified some languages and raised them to the status of official languages to the detriment of many other languages that become de facto trapped in misrecognition nationally

or in the misnomer of local languages. This is the argument of Kembo Sure who takes issue in Chapter 10 with the officialisation of English and Kiswahili in Kenya, as this official act of legitimacy delegitimises, by the same token, all other 42 Kenyan languages. By making English and Kiswahili iconic languages in Kenya, they become de jure national identity markers languages and linguistic flagships of Kenyan citizenship. The paper promotes multilingualism as a source of peace and social cohesion and values multilingual competency as relevant for a dynamic linguistic communication in the twenty-first century that eclipses the monolingual and monocultural concepts of 'self' and 'others'.

There is an impending concern regarding the rate at which languages are facing extinction, with half of the about 7000 languages worldwide predicted to die out within a century. While many languages are being extinguished, English, which has been the language of imperial power and a de facto language of science, kept on thriving through industrialisation and the information society and has become a global lingua franca whose expansion has now earned it the name of a killer language. Researching the extinction of the Hawaiian language, Abdul Matin in Chapter 11 draws the attention of linguists to language eradication and advocates the digitisation of endangered languages via the digital practices of the network society and the new technological paradigm of informationalism. Matin sees Castells' (2004) notions of the network and informationalism as valuable in the preservation of endangered languages, and emphasises 'will' and 'transmission' as key concepts over 'the market' in the revitalization of these languages.

In Chapter 12, Thapasya Jayraj and Rajesh Kumar demonstrate that identity and community attributes are embedded in kinship terms and some parts of speech such as pronouns. Studying five sociolects of Malayalam, namely Thiyya, Nair, Namboothiri, Mappila, and Christian dialects, they prove that pronouns and kinship terms exhibit a gamut of variations in relation to the sociolect. Variations are far from purely phonological but are each unique and connect directly to the identity of a specific community. Pronoun use in Malayalam sociolects is largely governed by power and class relations, reigniting the question of whether identity influences language or vice versa. It is, however, obvious that there is a bidirectional influence between language and identity, which are intertwined and constitute a complex social structure that reveals speakers' identity in discourse based on their language choice. The class distinction becomes apparent in the language forms used, with some forms prevailing in specific groups as a result of their social class or influence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991). Language is a harbinger of identity and instantiates self and others in discourse and presupposes inclusion or exclusion depending on usage.

Youth culture and language are often perceived as impenetrable by non-members as they translate sociality unfamiliar with outsiders. Analysing students' argot at IIT Madras, Namita Krishnamurthy and Rajesh Kumar view it as a rich and highly developed in-group language influenced by the linguistic context in India and especially English. *Insti lingo*, the campus language at IITM, is a lively linguistic site that is permeated by and draws on the developing language trends of the 'youth bulge'. It, therefore, mirrors the broader phenomenon of 'Indian English' or debatably 'English of India'. As a sociolect, *insti lingo* shapes and corroborates IITM students' identity, as well as membership of the school as instantiated by this slang, and is resisted within specific sub-groups and communities on campus. By researching the IIT social life, Krishnamurthy and Kumar endeavoured to determine the intersection between language, youth culture and identity (see also Nortier and Svendsen, 2015). Within the youth culture, they uncovered the current and counter-current of the movement, prevalent in various sites such as the feelings of *insti pride* predominant across the IITs and juxtaposed with the resistive counter-culture of *HS pride*, a highly contested ideal among the multiple identities in operation in the campus community. The example of MA students is highlighted to illustrate fluidity in identity positioning across and outside the IITM campus, as they are ascribed membership of the school due to their being registered students and residents of IITM and paradoxically refuted their status of IIT students (due to their lack of engineering proficiency).

In Chapter 14, Miki Nishioka examines the intergenerational attitude of Japanese loanwords. While the older generation considers these to be erosive of their identity, youngsters under 20 create and reshape their identities through engaging loanwords or creating new words using logical and linguistic methods (see also Tomoda, 1999:240; Torikai, 2005). The rate at which *katakanago* (loanwords) is being incorporated and mixed is considered to be prolific, and compared to an immune system responding to pathogens.

There are many reasons influencing language shift and, researching Hmar speakers in Mizoram and its neighbouring areas, Vanlal Tluonga Bapui in this last chapter points out that they are increasingly losing their language as a result of adopting that of a majority neighbouring group for subsistence and growth and acculturating to its way of life (see Hassan, 2006; Arora and Kipgen, 2012). In this process, the Hmar identity is sublimated and its remnant is more emotional than linguistic. Hmar identity transmutation is documented even in population official documents, as the Census of India lists of tribes according to the language spoken shows that a sizeable number of Hmar tribal people are not listed as Hmar

because of the adoption of the dominant language in their location. Speakers of Lushai (Mizo), Thadou-Kuki, Simte, Rangte, and other kin languages of the Hmar tribe are excluded from the Hmar tribe list.

To conclude, this book is a resourceful book recommended to academics and students in the field of linguistic anthropology in general and language and identity in particular, as it substantiates theory with field narratives. The various perspectives presented in the volume mostly problematise a unidimensional view of identity and advocate it as a multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept. Its inextricable interweaving with language complexifies its study, and this intricacy is compounded when language becomes a vehicle for faith dissemination, social categorisation, membership affiliation, national identity and, to say the least, cultural representation as highlighted by the papers in this book. One of the good points of the book is the problematisation of language and culture in a global world. The discussion on informationalism in the context of language revitalisation is another interesting point, while the analysis on Urdu and Hindu as translating religious nationalism echoes recurring political stalemate in India. In spite of its 14 papers, 10 of them report on studies carried out in India. While this discrepancy in the number of articles on India may be insignificant, given the size of the country both geographically and demographically, it could, however, be viewed as a weakness of the book. Also, while on the whole the volume reads well, there are, nonetheless, some language issues in the contributors' section, especially on pages 232–233, which pinpoint an instance of editorial laxity.

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