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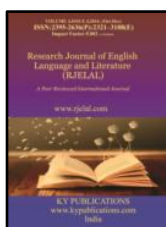
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**GRAMSCI'S NOTION OF SUBALTERNITY AND BERNSTEIN'S PEDAGOGIC DISCOURSE:
THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Basil Bernstein's *Pedagogic Discourse* attempts to capture more than the conventional notion of a classroom discourse. It seeks to encapsulate a sense of the social practices involved in educational activities and more importantly, those principles that determine the structuring of these in an academic context. This creation of a social order and identity is particularly true when acquiring a second language. Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'subalternity' appears to have a subtle influence on the learners of a 'super-central language' (Corcoran, 1994) like English. The principal aim of this paper is to analyze and depict those subaltern influences and challenges that affect such a discourse where students learn English as part of their curriculum since it is the medium of instruction in most of the universities across India. An exploration into the attitudes and approaches among learners reveal certain distinct factors partly because English was part of the colonial package and currently, it is learnt primarily due to 'transnational economic systems of interest' (Corcoran, 1994).

Key Words: language learning, subalternity, discourse, pedagogy

Language acquisition is a process by which humans acquire the capacity to recognize and understand language, and thereby produce and use words and sentences to communicate. Among learners, the reason for acquiring a second language may vary from personal interest to academic demand. According to Judie Haynes (2007) second-language acquisition happens in five stages: preproduction or the silent period, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency. Several factors may aid or impede in how a person relates to and acquires an additional language. The notion of 'subalternity' as evinced by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, in the context of the linguistic unification of Italy advocated by Alessandro Manzoni in the 19th century, throws up various sociocultural and

psychological affects that can impact and shape an individual's linguistic pursuit. The ensuing tension between "a super-central language" (Corcoran, 1994) that needs to be acquired in an academic context and the existing subaltern influences can directly affect a 'pedagogic discourse' (as defined by Basil Bernstein).

Bernstein's Pedagogic Discourse: A Brief

Basil Bernstein is best known for his four-volume series of books entitled *Class, Codes, and Control* in which he has investigated the relationship between language and education and how this relationship reflects and structures inequality. He considers discourse as "a principle for appropriating other discourses and bringing them into special relation with each other for the purposes of selective transmission and acquisition" (Bernstein,

1990, p. 181). According to him, there are three principles or rules governing pedagogic discourse: distribution, relocation or reconstruction, and evaluation. They are in hierarchical relation to one another. Thus, institutional practices and the upper strata of government are governed by rules of distribution; the transformation of school subjects are governed by those of relocation; and pedagogic discourse is governed by evaluation.

Although Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse is a highly intricate and complicated, it provides an empirical description of how reproduction works and how different sections of society are positioned. It is constructed in instances of particular lessons termed 'curriculum genres' (Christie, 1989) and the overall cycles of such genres should be thought of as 'curriculum macrogenres' (Christie, 1994). A curriculum genre is so-called because, like other instances of genres in language, it represents 'a staged, goal-oriented social process' (Martin, Christie, & Rothery, n.d., p. 59). In offering a definition of pedagogic discourse, Bernstein said that it is "the rule which embeds a discourse of competence (skills of various kinds) into a discourse of social order in such a way that the latter always dominates the former. We shall call the discourse transmitting specialized competences and their relation to each other 'instructional' discourse and the discourse creating specialized order, relation, and identity 'regulative' discourse" (1990, p. 183).

In a language learning environment like the ESL, it is the 'regulative' discourse that might have a significant impact on the learners. The attitude of the learners towards the target language plays a crucial role and the factors influencing them could be instrumental or integral, depending on which a pedagogic discourse may create a particular order, relation, or identity. The learners' approach and behavior towards English, for instance, would depend a lot on sociocultural factors as well as their connect with their native language. Herein, Antonio Gramsci's notion of the subaltern influence on language acquisition would shed greater light into the psyche of the learners, though it was conceived in the context of the supremacy of the Italian language.

Gramsci's Notion of Subalternity and Language Education

Subaltern refers to individuals or groups who socially, politically and geographically reside at the margins of or outside of a particular hegemonic power structure. The topics of language and subaltern groups appear throughout Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci often associates the problem of political fragmentation among subaltern groups with issues concerning language and common sense. However, there are only a few notes where he explicitly connects his overlapping analyses of language and subalternity. He refers to 'language' as an indication of intellectual activity, even if unconscious, in which 'there is contained a specific conception of the world...', and then poses the question whether it is "better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment...", or "to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with labors of one's brain, chooses one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world..." (Gramsci, 1971, p. 323). In 1918, Gramsci published an article in *Il Grido del Popolo*, "A Single Language and Esperanto", in which he criticizes the proposal that the Italian Socialist party should adopt Esperanto. At first instance, it seems that, he was against the formation of a 'common national language' or certainly any active strategy to create one. But, by 1935, he welcomed it and argued that "it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language." However, this would be to miss the point of both arguments, which go to the heart of the issues of fragmentation of common sense under the conditions of subalternity.

On the one hand, Gramsci is utilizing the arguments of G.I. Ascoli, a prominent Italian linguist at the end of the nineteenth century and one of the main opponents of Manzoni, who argued that dialects and previous languages of speakers exert pressure on new languages being learnt and thus, there is continual pressure that changes the 'standard' language being imposed (Ives, 2004, pp. 24-30). On the other hand, Gramsci is not just

making a technical linguistic point about the degree of success of this strategy. He points out that while, from Manzoni's position, Florentine is a 'living' language enabling its speakers to be creative, expressive and productive, for most of Italy it is more like an 'artificial' language imposed from the outside that enables little more than mechanical repetition and acceptance of a foreign conception of the world, and ultimately, the subordination to a culture and philosophy that is not understood as belonging to the speaker him/herself.

While Gramsci favors children speaking their local languages, he encourages them to learn other languages and is fully aware of the prestige and cultural politics involved in these questions of which languages children speak. In a letter to his son, Giuliano, Gramsci reflects on his own childhood noting how his classmates had great difficulty with speaking Italian, giving him a position of superiority over them (Gramsci, 1994, Vol.1, p. 356). He writes that sometimes better knowledge of Italian makes a student "seem to be more intelligent and quick, whereas sometimes this is not so,..." (Gramsci, 1994, Vol.1, p. 240). Therefore, there is a need for an active participation that enables subaltern groups not only to use the language, institutions and to consume or absorb culture but allows subaltern groups to use them creatively, to add to them, and alter them in relation to their experiences. In this sense, Gramsci is worried about the outcome of institutions, culture, politics and language being 'imposed' from 'above' or 'outside' in a manner that reinforces feelings of inferiority and passivity in subaltern groups. Gramsci understands this not as an overall condition, but as a matter of degree depending on different conditions of various subaltern groups.

While Gramsci advocates the learning of a new language, he has reservations on language being imposed on individuals and groups, in such a way that it causes subordination. In other words, he is wary of integral factors such as cultural assimilation of the target language and the feeling of elitism that one acquires when one masters a new language. He seems to hold that learning a language is only for a functional role and not at the cost of one's own language.

Subalternity and the English language: The Indian Context

Graddol in his *English Next India* lists the attitudes of Indians towards English, both positive and negative. As for the positive ones, English is seen as "a language of liberation and liberalism", "a language of modernity and development", "a language of geographical mobility", "a language of social mobility", "a language which brings money" and "a defence against Hindi". The negative attitude is then expressed only in one role: "a language of enslavement" (2010, p. 64). The major problem about English, its colonial past, now competes in the attitudinal "conflict" with very strong opponents. The negative attitudes towards English seem to have been defeated by the many positive ones. English language is gradually freeing itself of the shadows of the colonial past. However, history cannot be changed and its consequences will be in the minds of people if not forever, then certainly for a very long time.

For example, a research revealed that English was considered to be the desired medium of education; however, it was not desired to function as a mother tongue. This reinforces the trend which was mentioned above, when describing the functions of English in South Asia, that English is used for acquiring knowledge, whereas a local language, in India Hindi, is preferred for expressing the South Asian, here Indian, identity (Gargesh, 2009, p. 101).

Graddol cites results of the survey carried out by the Indian television channel CNN-IBN in 2009 which express very similar attitudes to the ones stated above. Most of the respondents felt that knowledge of English was important to succeed in life and more than a half of them thought that those who could speak fluent English were superior. On the other hand, most of them also stated that knowing the state language was very important and more than a half of them felt that English was making the Indians forget their mother tongue and added that jobs should be reserved for those who spoke the state language (2010, p. 64).

There are, however, other opinions which contribute to the positive view of English. In another study of attitudes towards English, it was seen as

enhancing social mobility and individual personality and more than three fourths of the respondents believed that progress in technology and science would definitely not be so quick without English. The survey also revealed a strong parental encouragement of the study of English. The last, and probably the most positive, finding about English was that the whole 75 percent of the respondents considered English to be one of the Indian languages (Gargesh, 2009, pp. 101-102). This opinion clearly manifests how deep the roots of English in the Indian society are. And as Gargesh adds, the extent of positive attitudes towards English indicates that "English is here to stay for quite some time as a valuable tool" (2009, p. 102).

Wider access to English is nowadays demanded in India "by employers, parents, lower castes, in rural and urban areas alike" (Graddol, 2010, p. 112). People from the lower classes have recognized that education is their only weapon against poverty and they demand an equal access to English (Mani, 2013). Few years ago politicians secured rural votes by demonstrating a negative attitude towards English; now they have to lobby for extending English to the masses to reach the same goal (Graddol, 2010, p. 65). The growing demand for English is also felt by official organizations for English language teaching. For example, ESOL (English for Students of Other Languages), an organization which administrates certificate tests on English language for students and teachers, actively takes part in the promotion of the English language. The organization collaborates with the Indian government on making English accessible to all groups and on improving language skills (Express News Service, 2009).

One of the groups which call strongly for English accessible to all is the Dalit community. They see English as a key to their emancipation, not only because of the opportunities for social mobility it offers to them, but also because of the possibility of escaping with the use of English the traditional caste positioning which is encoded in the regional languages themselves. They also perceive English as unifying the Dalit movement across India and by that making possible for them to fight a common political cause (Graddol 2010, p. 65). They have even

established a deity of their movement: the Goddess of English. She is depicted in both Anglo-American and Indian manner: resembling the American Statue of Liberty standing in front of the map of India, wearing a sari and an English straw hat, standing on a computer and holding a giant pink pen (Masani, 2012).

As English increasingly becomes the *de facto* mother tongue in many urban families, many people are appalled by this trend. They feel that English and "its rampant use will strip them of their Indian-ness". On one hand, they acknowledge that English is very useful as it is connecting them with the whole world. On the other hand, they say that English is alienating them from their familial and cultural roots (Rai, 2012).

Observations and Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion, it is quite evident that subaltern sensitivity and affiliation to one's culture and language is on the wane in India. In India, subalternity appears to have been sacrificed on the altar of modernization, upward mobility, and economic progress. English enjoys a superior status and many in the urban areas try to imbibe the culture of the English speaking countries, the very factor that Gramsci warned of. Moreover, this outlook and perception have significant impact on the outcome in language discourse. Since the attitude is mostly integrative, learning English and the demand for it, and the outcome are so immense that India has become the second largest English speaking country after the USA. Therefore, in India, in order to retain and safeguard native languages and cultures, there is a "need to perceive English as a functional language rather than as an elite language that creates socio-political conflict" (Kumar, 2011).

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