




## Multilingualism at the Margins

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## Multilingualism at the Margins

### Cover Page Footnote

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Estrella Olivares-Orellana, EdD, is Adjunct Assistant Professor for the Bilingual/ Bicultural Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her scholarly interests are in the areas of bilingual and bicultural education, mentoring in education, science education in bilingual settings, and the academic experiences of immigrant students. She also works for the Multilingual Department of Uniondale School District in New York. She received a Doctorate in Curriculum and Teaching and a Masters in International Educational Development both from Teachers College, Columbia University. She also received a BS in Biochemistry from SUNY Stony Brook. She is a native of Chile but lived many years in Argentina before migrating to the United States in 1994.

## Book Review

# Multilingualism at the Margins

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**Estrella Olivares-Orellana**

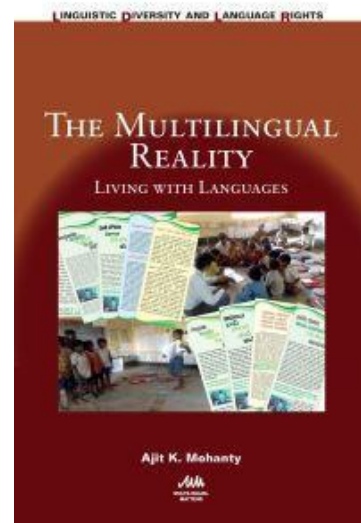
Teachers College, Columbia University

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### Book Reviewed:

Mohanty, A. K. (2019). *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages*. Bristol, UK/Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters ("Linguistic Diversity & Language Rights" Series). ISBN 9781788921978. 257 pages; paperback ISBN 9781788921954, 288 pages. \$49.95.

This book offers an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of multilingualism in multilingual societies from the perspective of marginalized groups kept in the margins as a result of unequal access to opportunities and power. Written by Ajit Mohanty, former national fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and retired professor of psychology, who has published extensively in the areas of psycholinguistics, multilingualism, and multilingual education. Mohanty provides concrete structural examples that function as instruments that propagate this inequality in India, but that can be analyzed similarly in many other postcolonial societies. In a time that seems marked by unequal power dynamics, this exploration into the subtleties of languages in multilingual societies can be an invaluable tool for students, researchers, educators, sociolinguists, psycholinguists, and anyone interested in multilingualism and multilingual education.



Tove Skutnabb-Kangas's preface praises this book as a summary of Ajit Mohanty's work of a lifetime, beautifully and descriptively capturing circumstances that are not exclusive to India. Similarly, the foreword by renowned Western scholar in the field of bilingual education Jim Cummins, as well as the afterword, written by the equally prominent Indian scholar, Annamalai, highlight the significance of this work and provide summaries making impactful historical connections.

In Chapter 1, "Languaging Without Borders and Boundaries," the author introduces the book by poignantly describing how growing up with multiple languages affords you the richness of a diverse world. There's an emphasis on the beauty of

existing in a multilingual environment in which levels of competence need not be judged and diversity is accommodated holistically, with many languages weaving a communicative world. The author then moves on to describing how this book theorizes the meaning of being multilingual in a multilingual society and how children learn to negotiate existing in a society with multifaceted communicative demands. Throughout the book, the author's work demonstrates the different ways in which he has attempted to examine his assumptions about the place of languages in a multilingual world that he has, at times, idealized as romantic but that evidence has revealed to be more complicated than harmonious. In many ways, this book tells the story of the author's journey through a world of many languages. It examines how multilingual societies and individuals are different and why and the pervasiveness of the neglect of some languages in various domains of society. This hierarchical organization of languages and its rationale challenges the author's postulations about the dynamics of languages in multilingual societies and takes him through an analysis that begins with an examination of the linguistic practices of tribal peoples in India and leads him to a deeper analysis of indigenous, tribal, minority, and minoritized (ITM) languages in multilingual societies. This book seeks to present the reader with "views from the margins, to understand the dynamics and share the agony of linguistic discrimination and the disadvantages of the ITM communities in the multilingual world of cumulative neglect and regressive marginalization" (p. 3).

Chapter 2 offers the conceptual foundations for understanding the ways in which multilingual societies and individuals are different and why. The author describes his upbringing in Puri, a place that houses one of the four major shrines for Hindu pilgrimage in India, in which languages naturally unite in routine temple rituals. The use of multiple languages for various communicative practices seemed both necessary and natural. The author juxtaposes this notion with the existence of multiple languages in places such as Canada and the United States, which his later exposure revealed was a region in which languages remained isolated and confined to certain groups or speakers without tendencies to share communicative spaces. In that region, the general shared spaces were mainly monolingual in English, with other languages used merely for restricted communicative familial purposes within communities of the speakers of other languages.

Something markedly different and noticeable between the speakers of heritage and ethnic languages in these countries and the speakers of English was that the former were bilinguals in their language and in English, with a clear language shift toward monolingualism in English among the younger generations. As the author explains, bilingualism among the minority groups was a mere transition point from monolingualism in the native language to monolingualism in the dominant language, with bilingualism accepted as a point of departure only when it included the dominant language. This was strikingly unlike his understanding of what it meant to live in a society in which multiple languages coexist and where languages aren't treated as discrete units. The author notes that the communicative scenarios in India present languages and users of languages that "blend into the total ecology of communication in a manner which makes them a natural and accepted aspect of each communicative act:

usually no language and no speaker is ‘marked’ as being different or out of context” (p.13).

Thus, the author posits that multilingualism must be examined as a sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic phenomenon different from how bilingualism is viewed in typical monolingual societies. This resonates with García and Kleyn’s (2016) translanguaging theory, which differentiates the concept of a “named” language from that of the language system of individual speakers. As they articulate it, “one matter is the named language, quite another is the linguistic system of words, sounds, constructions and so forth that permits a speaker to speak, understand, read, write, communicate, and do other linguistic work” (p. 10). This theory builds on Garcia’s (2009) plural vision for bilingual education, which sees multilingualism as going beyond monolingual societies’ views of multilingualism.

The author then moves on to explain the difficulties of defining multilingualism in such diverse and complex contexts; in its core significance, multilingualism refers to “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 interactions with the speakers of any of these languages” (p. 17). This chapter effectively describes various features of multilingualism and language users in society, with vibrant examples of multilingual functioning. Interestingly, the author points out that his language socialization studies in India have demonstrated that “a multilingual society is not a Tower of Babel; it is a dynamic structure of multiple languages, each extending into the other in a complex interplay of multiple identities and, early in their development, children are socialized to live with multilingualism as natural phenomenon” (p. 33).

An interesting dichotomy of multilingualism is presented in chapter 3, which discusses whether multilingualism is seen as a resource or a burden. Detailed examples are provided for both viewpoints. The author begins the chapter by recounting an encounter with a family of Odia speakers who insisted on speaking in English to their daughter, who understood and spoke Odia quite well. The parents felt that too many languages would be a burden, so they were trying to focus on English, since that would be the language of her education. The author tried to explain that “it is not necessary for multilingual or bilingual children to be split between languages and that, in fact, many languages can be great resources for the mind as well as for society”; however, as is the case for many people around the world, these parents believed that their daughter’s multilingualism would be a burden. The chapter then describes various studies that have demonstrated positive outcomes and metalinguistic advantages of bilingualism and multilingualism for different groups of people.

Chapter 4 presents a powerful examination of the dynamics resulting when language hierarchies are at play. As the author points out, “When some languages are privileged over others, it triggers social discrimination, advantaging some at the expense of the others” (p. 70). This section of the book analyzes this “othering” of languages in multilingual societies. From his analysis of multilingual societies around the world, the author attempts to demonstrate the presence of a hierarchy with a double divide “between the most dominant languages(s) and the major languages, on

the one hand, and between the major languages and ‘other’ languages, usually the indigenous, tribal, minority and minoritized (ITM) languages, on the other” (p. 70). This chapter offers examples of Kond communities to indicate that disadvantages normally associated with minoritized languages are “socially constructed through a chain of unequal treatments in multilingual societies” (p. 71). Citing Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), he presents cases of institutionalized linguistic inequality in India to illustrate how discriminatory state policies and practices can be responsible for the weakness and loss of ITM languages. Most poignantly, the author rationalizes that this weakness of ITM languages caused by long-term neglect is then used by policy makers to justify further neglect and inattention, thus perpetuating a vicious circle of language disadvantage. This chapter also presents an examination of hierarchical language practices around the world and closes by discussing the implications of the double divide and how it is related to the instrumental and integrative functions of languages at different levels of the hierarchy.

The impact of these linguistic hierarchical dynamics on individual identity in multilingual societies is examined in chapter 5. The author shows the strategies of assimilation at play when the move toward a voluntary shift is individual rather than collective. As he explains, the societal linguistic hierarchy, with the dominance of some languages over others, is a reality in multilingual societies, causing an inseparability between language choice and attitudes, societal power relations, political processes, language ideologies, and identities. While recognizing that there are complex realities of language change, language contact, shift, marginalization, and maintenance at play in multilingual societies, the studies described in this chapter illuminate the conditions under which some dominated, low-status languages in multilingual contexts are further marginalized while others are decidedly maintained.

Chapter 6 offers a discussion on language disadvantage, capability deprivation, and poverty. As it is clear throughout the book, languages in multilingual societies are systematized in a hierarchy of power and status that allows some languages privileged access to power and resources, whereas others are sidelined through sustained abandonment and discriminatory state policies. “The less powerful marginalized languages may continue to survive, but they are pushed out of major domains of use, restricted mostly to domains of home and community communication and robbed of their instrumental vitality” (p. 128). This has economic consequences because, as rationalized by the author, poverty is the absence of capability development. The author applies a capability approach to the consequences of this language hierarchy and uses examples of neglectful schooling practices with speakers of ITM languages to illustrate that the nature and causes of poverty are best comprehended as lack of real social opportunities rather than the typical economic markers, such as low income or impoverished life conditions. Brilliantly stated, “education and socio-economic inequalities are perpetuated when the languages that people speak or do not speak become instruments of power, control, discrimination and access to resources” (p. 142).

Language disadvantage and capability deprivation lead to the neglect of ITM languages, as illustrated in chapter 7. Specific examples of India’s language-in-education policy are provided by the author. An analysis of these policies exemplifies the ways in which education in post-independence India reflects the role and influence of the

linguistic hierarchy mentioned in earlier chapters. Referencing Ruíz (1984), the author explains that “India’s language policy and practices have treated languages as problematic and there is a clear absence of a language-as-resource perspective” (p. 145), which has contributed to the further impoverishment, marginalization, and endangerment of ITM languages. India’s education was broadly multilingual until British rule, which introduced the teaching of English as a subject and disrupted the use of languages as a medium of instruction. Since then, “language-in-education policy has remained unclear due to a continued ambivalence with respect to Indian languages vis-à-vis English” (p. 148). The Indian Ministry of Education spearheaded various initiatives to address the lack of uniformity with respect to languages in school curricula, which have been modified to meet the needs of clashing groups that support either English, mother tongue (MT), or regional language (RL); however, the language-as-a-problem orientation continues to downgrade MT and ITM languages.

Chapter 8 invites us to rethink multilingual education by exploring educational models in multilingual societies, stressing that high-quality multilingual education (MLE), which builds on MT literacy by using MT as the medium of instruction (MoI) and introduces other languages progressively, moving them from subjects to MoI, can ultimately build multilingual proficiency. On the contrary, the author maintains that multilingual education with early transition from the indigenous language to the dominant language can be a potent instrument for subtractive bilingualism.

The book ends with an important analysis of the dominance of English in multilingual societies. It begins by recounting an interesting event that took place in 2010 in the Lakhimpur-Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh, India. An English goddess was deified in the presence of villagers and guests, presenting English as the emancipatory language of the *dalit* (subjugated) people of India, who, according to Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit journalist and alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, “need a divine symbol to reinforce and affirm their faith in the power of English” (p. 185). This event exemplifies the promotion of a growing belief in India (as in many other parts of the world) that sees English as the language of liberation, progress, and prosperity. This culminating chapter offers clear examples of the dominance and impact of English on other languages, highlighting it as a symbol of unequal power relations perpetuated by educational systems that function as social instruments for legitimizing this inequality.

This work offers a multifaceted analysis of the significance of multilingualism from the perspective of multilingual societies and marginalized communities in a time marked by unequal power dynamics and linguistic hierarchies. A topic of further exploration could center on the work of advocating for language policies that recognize and protect ITM languages and considering pathways for challenging these systems of language dominance, creating educational programs that embrace students’ multilingual identities.

This book is a valuable tool that can be used by educators, researchers, pre-service bilingual and multilingual teachers, educational linguists, psycholinguists, and anyone seeking to understand and work against power imbalances prevalent in multilingual societies.

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