The discursive construction of social contexts: The politics of multilingualism

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Multilingualism and identities

In multilingual societies language choice, use, and attitudes are intrinsically linked to language ideologies, relations of power, political arrangements, and speakers’ identities (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2001, 2004). Furthermore, identity options offered to individuals at a given moment in history are subject to shifting language ideologies that legitimise and value particular identities more than others. Pavlenko and Blackledge differentiate between imposed identities (which are for one reason or another not negotiable), assumed identities (which are accepted and not negotiated), and negotiable identities (which are contested by groups and individuals). All three categories acquire a particular status within unique sociohistorical circumstances, and options that are acceptable for some groups and individuals may be imposed on others, or even on the same groups at a different point in time. Alternatively, assumed identity options that are not negotiated by one group of individuals, may become a battleground for another group that approaches them as negotiable. In this view, then, imposed (or non-negotiable) identities and subject positions are the ones that individuals cannot resist or contest at a particular point in time, while assumed (or non-negotiated) identities or subject positions are those that many individuals are comfortable with and not interested in contesting. Finally, negotiable identities or subject positions refer to all identity options which can be contested and resisted by particular individuals and groups.

The challenge and contestation of identity options typically come from the most marginalised segments of the population, which in multilingual societies often consist of linguistic minorities. How much room for resistance individuals and groups may have to particular positioning will depend on each particular situation, the social and linguistic resources available to participants, and the relations of power which set the boundaries for particular identity options. Multilingual societies which apparently tolerate or promote heterogeneity often undervalue or appear to ignore the linguistic diversity of their populace. Monolingual ideologies may be produced, reproduced, contested or resisted in local interactions and in the public discourse of powerful elites.

Identities, ideologies and multilingualism

In this paper I examine data at local and structural levels which appear to demonstrate that both in parents’ interactions with schools, and in public discourse about languages other than English, a powerful monolingual ideology is played out in multilingual Britain. Firstly I introduce Bangladeshi mothers’ reports of their relations with their children’s school in Birmingham. The women’s attitudes to their children’s school literacy, and to their home and community literacies, were analysed alongside the attitudes and assumptions of their children’s teachers. Secondly I discuss discourses about language testing for citizenship, and attitudes to languages other than English in these debates.

Investigating literacy practices: Teachers positioning parents as illiterate

The study of Bangladeshi mothers’ involvement in their children’s schooling focused on a single school in an inner-city area of central England. At the time of data collection, 21% of children in the school were of Bangladeshi origin, and 73% of Pakistani origin. The mothers of 18 six-year-old Bangladeshi children were the participants in the study. All of them had been born in Bangladesh, and migrated to Britain. Most of them had attended school for five or six years in Bangladesh, although three had never been to school. The spoken language at home for these families was Sylheti. All of the women reported that their children spoke English to each other, and Sylheti when speaking to parents and other adults at home. They all reported that they were able to read and write Bengali (Bengali is the language of literacy and education in Bangladesh - the families’ spoken language, Sylheti, does not have a written form), except the three who had not attended school. None of the eighteen reported that she was a confident reader or writer of English, or a confident speaker of English. In addition to recordings of home and school literacy practices, data included interviews with the children's mothers and teachers.

The teachers commented on the Bangladeshi women’s ability to support their children’s school-related literacy in terms which closely
fitted Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of *habitus*. The teachers’ view of the women as literacy tutors was summarised as follows:

_in many cases mum’s at home on her own because dad’s either out working or out, you know, out, so there’s a mother at home with five, six kids, now it’s very hard to have time...who are you going to choose to be with and you’ve got often small babies, you know, incredibly busy people... I think reading is the last thing on their minds really, even though I think they’re willing but it’s just not possible_

The teachers seemed to consider that the women did not possess the appropriate resources to organise their homes as adequate literacy learning environments. The school planned to extend borrowing of school books to nursery children, not for the children to read, but for the parents to read to the children:

_You know, story time at the end of the day, because that’s a very white, middle-class thing isn’t it, reading a story before your child goes to bed? I don’t think that happens_

Implicit in these plans was an intention to teach the parents the behaviours of ‘white, middle-class’ families, in order to ensure the children’s academic success. The women’s existing cultural and linguistic capital was of no value in the majority domain at this time because the school dictated that the only capital that ‘counted’ was that associated with “middle-class, white” groups.

Recognising a need for more effective communication with the children’s parents, the teachers said that they had adopted a strategy which focused on those mothers who had been educated in Britain, and who therefore were able to speak and understand English:

_there are a lot of parents, particularly younger parents that have been educated in this country, and they're, say, in their early twenties, they have some understanding of the system and they do ask a lot of questions._

None of the women in this study had been educated in Britain. Only those who already possessed (to some degree) the cultural and linguistic capital required by the school would be offered help and advice. That is, those women who were ‘more English’ and ‘less Bangladeshi’ would be offered support.

**Literate positionings: Bangladeshi women as literacy tutors**

The interview data demonstrated that the Bangladeshi women viewed themselves as competent providers of literacy instruction in their community language, Bengali. All eighteen women said that their children were learning to read and write Bengali, or would shortly do so. Twelve of the eighteen took steps to directly support their children’s Bengali literacy learning:

_As often as I can I will spend twenty minutes teaching them Bengali._

_I sit with the children for two hours on Saturdays and Sundays, and I teach them Bengali and Arabic_

Those women who did not offer support at home for the children to read Bengali said that they would send their children to a tutor for this purpose when they were eight years old. The three women who were not themselves literate in Bengali sent their children to a local tutor to have them taught. Most of the women reported that they had a small number of Bengali literacy primer books, some of which had been brought from Bangladesh on family trips. The women spoke of the symbolic importance of teaching their children to be literate in Bengali:

_Because we are Bengali, to us it is very important that Muhitur learns to read and write Bengali._

_It is very important to me that he learns the language because we are Bengali._

_It is good that he has English as a second language._
These responses made clear the links between the community language and cultural identity. Bengali literacy represented the group’s identification as Bengalis, and their difference from the majority culture, and from other minority cultures. For these women, to learn to read and write Bengali was to be Bengali. Although economic power was not likely to accrue from their children learning to be literate in Bengali, the women invested considerable resources in this process.

**Cultural positionings: Bangladeshi women transmitting culture**

The Bangladeshi women’s cultural capital was further evident in what they said about storytelling in the home. Of the eighteen women, fifteen said that they told stories to their children in the home language. These stories were told regularly, and were in a variety of traditions:

- *I tell the children stories in Sylheti, traditional stories, Islamic stories, and stories I make up myself. I do this two or three times a week.*

- *I make up stories for my three boys, like ‘there were once three princes who became kings’, and so on.*

- *I tell them Islamic stories which explain what Islam is, the proper stories*

The women used their cultural and linguistic resources in this organised oral literacy activity which was used to reinforce religious and cultural traditions, as storytelling was used to transmit aspects of culture. Both literacy in Bengali and storytelling in Sylheti were important aspects of the lives of the women and their children. They were associated with cultural identity, religion and symbolic power. That is, the women possessed an identifiable cultural and linguistic capital which had currency in the minority domains of home and community, but had little negotiating power in the school setting.

**Multilingualism and ideology**

In the second example I investigate how powerful discourses contribute to the construction of social arenas in which linguistic minority speakers are unable to negotiate their identities. The chain of discourse connects the discursive context of the ‘race riots’ in northern England in the Summer of 2001 with the initial political response to them, and then with the 2002 Act of Parliament which introduced an extension to legislation relating to language testing for citizenship. The texts involved a speech by a Labour M.P. in the immediate aftermath of the social disorder in the north of England, a Government report into the causes of the ‘race riots’, a Government White Paper, and an article written by the Home Secretary.

**The politics of multilingualism**

On July 17th, 2001, in the aftermath of a summer of social unrest in the towns of Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley in northern England, Ann Cryer, Labour Member of Parliament (M.P.) for Keighley, made a speech in the House of Commons during the Westminster Hall debate on Urban Community Relations. Cryer offered reasons for the involvement of ‘young Asian men’ in ‘the criminal activity’ on the streets:

*The main cause is the lack of a good level of English, which stems directly from the established tradition of bringing wives and husbands from the sub-continent who have often had no education and have no English.*

Later in her speech, one of the solutions proposed by Cryer was as follows:

*the Government should consider having an element of English as an entry clearance requirement for husbands and wives who seek permanent settlement. There should be a further requirement for them to take a full-time English course to reach a reasonable level.*

Here Ann Cryer argues that the Government should prevent the permanent settlement of those who do not have ‘a reasonable level’ of English. The proposed demand for ‘a reasonable level’ of English echoes the existing requirement in law for general applicants for naturalisation to have ‘sufficient knowledge’ of English. Here, though, Ann Cryer exhorts the Government to introduce English language tests ‘as an entry clearance requirement’. Cryer here appears to be calling for language tests at the port of entry, so that only those who can already speak ‘an element of English’ should be allowed into Britain, with a requirement then for them ‘to reach a reasonable level’ if they are granted leave to remain in Britain. Such a requirement could
only be invoked after entry to the country if a test of some sort were introduced, for example a test for British citizenship applicants. It appears that the M.P. is making two proposals here: (i) that the government should introduce new language tests at the port of entry, to reject any new immigrants who do not have ‘an element of English’, and (ii) a further test at some later date for those granted entry, to ensure that they have reached ‘a reasonable level of English’. It is not clear who decides what constitutes a ‘reasonable level’ of English, or according to what criteria such a judgement is made, but the implication must be that it is a greater level of proficiency (however defined) than ‘an element of English’, as it involves a requirement ‘to take a full-time English course’. The first of these proposals has not currently been adopted by the British government. The second was already included in existing legislation. However, it is the second of Cryer’s implicit demands (that there should be extension to, and more rigorous implementation of, English language testing of citizenship applicants) that the government would pick up and introduce into new legislation within sixteen months of this speech.

In her Westminster Hall speech, Ann Cryer rationalised her proposal for far-reaching changes to language testing for citizenship policy in terms which both racialised the debate and at the same time appealed to egalitarian values, arguing that ‘integration will be easier to achieve’ when:

all members of the Asian community have some grasp of English and when whites and Asians recognise that there can be gain only from all sides living together in peace and understanding. The alternative is a Belfast-like situation in which we will all be the losers, including whites.

The simple opposition here is between ‘whites’ and ‘Asians’ – an opposition characterised by ‘the Asian community’ not only (implicitly) speaking languages other than English, but also failing to grasp English. Here justification of discriminatory language policy (all Asians must grasp English before they are allowed to become citizens) co-exists alongside an apparently liberal call for all sides to live together in peace and understanding. In the M.P.’s speech racialisation of the language debate masquerades as liberal, egalitarian argument.

**The Cantle Report**

The Government’s response to the disturbances in towns and cities in northern England in 2001 was to establish a Review Team, led by Lord Cantle, “to seek the views of local residents and community leaders in the affected towns and in other parts of England on the issues which need to be addressed to bring about social cohesion” (The Cantle Report 2001:i). The Report, Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team Chaired by Ted Cantle (henceforth The Cantle Report) was completed in December 2001. In The Cantle Report there is a call from the report’s authors for a national debate, led by Government, to develop ‘a new compact, or understanding, between all sections of the community’:

a more visible support for anti-discrimination measures, support for women’s rights, a universal acceptance of the English language (seen as particularly important in some areas) and respect for both religious difference and secular views.

Here several points are introduced to exemplify the topics to be engaged with in the ‘national debate’ ahead. When several points are listed together the interpreter makes connections between things which are not necessarily related (Fairclough 1989:188). In this example several liberal proposals are made: that there should be more support for anti-discrimination measures, that women’s rights should be supported, and that there should be respect for religious difference and secular views. These proposals are unarguably laudable and acceptable to most, despite their vagueness. Any other proposal linked with them is likely to be viewed as equally egalitarian. Thus, in this context ‘a universal acceptance of the English language’ has all the appearance of a liberal proposal. The argument here appears to be that if there is a universal acceptance of the English language, greater equality will ensue. Here ‘anti-discrimination measures’, ‘support for women’s rights’, ‘respect for religious difference’ and ‘(respect for) secular views’ all refer to examples of discriminatory practices which should be put right. The odd case is that of the English language, which is very far from being discriminated against. In fact if the list were to be consistent, the third example could read: ‘a universal acceptance of languages other than English’. Instead, the question of the English
language proficiency of linguistic minority people in Britain is stealthily and euphemistically introduced in a context which implies that this is a straightforward question of social justice.

The Cantle Report calls for ‘the promotion of new values’, and goes on as follows:

we would expect these new values to contain statements about the expectation that the use of the English language, which is already a pre-condition of citizenship, (or a commitment to become fluent within a period of time) will become more rigorously pursued, with appropriate support.

Here the law as it stands is invoked to support the notion that language testing is crucial for a cohesive society. In fact the report is incorrect here: there was no requirement for citizenship applicants to demonstrate that they ‘use’ English, merely that they meet the rather vague criterion of ‘sufficient knowledge’ of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic. The phrase ‘more rigorously pursued’ implies that either new legislation should be forthcoming to ensure that English is universally used, or that the existing law be invoked more strongly. It is difficult to imagine that a government could effectively legislate to ensure that linguistic minority groups ‘use’ the dominant language in all domains of society.

Secure Borders, Safe Haven

In this section discourses which previously were, to some extent at least, negotiable, contested and multiple, emerge in authoritative, legitimised and non-negotiable forms in the official texts of the Government White Paper, Secure Borders, Safe Haven. Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain (February 2002), leading to legislation enshrined in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill, which was granted Royal Assent in November 2002.

In the White Paper a rationale for legislative change is set out:

In an increasingly diverse world, it is vital that we strengthen both our sense of community belonging and the civic and political dimensions of British citizenship. In particular, we intend to offer language teaching and light touch education for citizenship for those making a home in the UK – with a view to a simple examination for citizenship applicants similar to that which exists in many other countries

Here the diversity of the ‘world’ carries two senses: first, that of the diverse world beyond British shores, which would attempt to bring its diversity into Britain; and second, the sense of Britain itself becoming increasingly diverse (presumably ethnically/culturally diverse). Why is it necessary that we strengthen our sense of community and citizenship? Because it is threatened by increasing diversity.

In the second half of the same paragraph, liberal and illiberal voices co-exist within a single consciousness:

This will strengthen the ability of new citizens to participate in society and to engage actively in our democracy. This will help people understand both their rights and obligations as citizens of the UK, and strengthen the bonds of mutual understanding between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. It will also help to promote individuals’ economic and social integration.

Implicitly, here, a failure or refusal to become proficient in English threatens democracy. In a recontextualisation of the Cantle Report, which called for debate about nationhood to revolve around language and law, and to determine the rights and responsibilities of each community, ‘responsibilities’ is now substituted with ‘obligations’. The same argument is here not only repeated in a more legitimate and authoritative context, but is put in a way that demands more of ‘people’.

Overcoming ‘the schizophrenia’

In October 2002 the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, wrote an article which was published on the Foreign Policy Centre website. It set out his vision of democracy, citizenship and civil society (Foreign Policy Centre 2002). The article was published during the month preceding the award of Royal Assent to the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002:

I have never said, or implied, that lack of fluency in English was in any
way directly responsible for the disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in the summer of 2001. However, speaking English enables parents to converse with their children in English, as well as their historic mother tongue, at home and to participate in wider modern culture. It helps overcome the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships.

The first sentence of this paragraph either responds to, or anticipates, its opposition. If lack of fluency in English was not directly responsible for the rioting, the possibility, and even the implication, remains that it was therefore indirectly responsible. Here ‘speaking English’ seems to mean the ability to speak English as well as actual use of English. In this sentence ‘historic’ is oppositional to ‘modern’, creating a tension between Asian languages and ‘wider modern culture’, which is presumably British. That is, Asian languages are linked to that which is narrow, and perhaps narrow-minded, archaic and out of date. The pronoun introducing the next sentence refers to ‘speaking English’, again meaning both proficiency and use. Speaking English at home, and the ability to speak English, can prevent ‘the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships’. The definite article lends authority here: there is a presupposition that ‘schizophrenia’ is a recognised and agreed phenomenon for people who speak minority languages at home. The verb ‘bedevils’ adds a sinister note, implying evil. This sentence is cohesively linked to the previous two, and is still governed by the connective ‘However’. As such, not only is a failure to speak English associated with mental and domestic disorder; it is also a factor in the outbreak of social disorder. Clearly the ability, or inability, of new migrants to speak English is associated with segregation, ignorance and hostility.

Conclusion

In the experiences of Bangladeshi families as they engage with their children’s schools, and in discourse surrounding the debate about the extension of language testing for citizenship legislation, lies the question of what it means to be British (or, perhaps, English). Despite the best efforts of the school and its teachers, the cultural and linguistic resources of the Bangladeshi mothers have little currency in the supporting their children’s English education.

In a society which is essentially monolingual and monocultural in its ideology, powerful structures prevent multilingual people from activating their multilingual and multicultural capital. These powerful structures are produced and reproduced in the kind of public, elite discourse rehearsed in the debate about language testing for citizenship. The dominant discourse in this debate is clearly monolingual in its ideological orientation. As English language dominance is conflated with a racialised ‘white’ dominance, the extension of an existing gatekeeping device to prevent people from negotiating their multilingual identities.

References


