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Elite Multilingualism and the Public Sphere

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Abstract
This paper looks at how elite multilingualism operates in the public sphere and how it helps maintain the status quo of society. It examines the various ways elite multilingualism affects our day-to-day life, from education to international workplaces. It exposes how elite multilingualism claims to give the individual a global, cosmopolitan citizenship, yet insidiously erases local and national identities and furthers the marginalization of voices of minority groups in the public sphere.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Multilingualism, Multiculturalism, Elitism, Cosmopolitanism

The traditional notion of the public sphere is largely informed by the definition Jürgen Habermas provides in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). For Habermas, the (bourgeois) public sphere is "the sphere of private people com[ing] together as a public" and involves the "public use of their reason" (27). This model assumes that equality is not a necessary condition for democracy, proposing that unequal individuals can simply bracket their differences temporarily to engage in deliberative discourse regarding 'public matters' and the 'common good'. It is evident that for diverse individuals to engage in discourse there is a necessity for (a) common language(s) that allow equal opportunity to the individual.

Yet studies in multilingualism have shown that some individuals are considered more equal than others by virtue of the languages they wield. Scholars argue that there is a sharp divide in the valuation of the plurilingual practices of middle-class people coming out of elite educational institutions as opposed to those of international students and people of immigrant backgrounds, suggesting a socially

constructed binary between *prestigious* and *plebeian* or *elite* and *folk* multilingualism. Elite multilingualism is defined as "a phenomenon that brings social and/or material capital, a sense of belonging, prestige, excellence, privilege, and access through the use of specific linguistic resources for certain social groups and individuals… [such that] language [becomes] an access code to a distinct perceived or aspired elite way of living and being" (Barakos and Selleck 2). Eliteness is understood as 'semiotic and communicative resources,' the strategic utilization and deployment of which functions to distinguish the individual, generally belonging to dominant social groups, in status, capital, and power.

Under the shadow of this power and status, the voices of minority social groups — the languages of the minority subject of the public sphere — are delegitimized, stigmatized, and disregarded. Elite multilingualism reinforces existing unequal power relations as it favors individuals who wield privileged, prestigious languages and adhere to "standard and monolingual forms and practices" (Heller, qtd. in De Costa 2). One can see that the linguistic leanings are set towards *standardness* and *purity*. Jürgen Jaspers speaks of "the 'prestige'/'pure' multilinguals — referring to the upwardly mobile, highly educated, higher socioeconomic status learners of two or more *internationally useful languages*," placing them "in opposition to 'plebeian'/'impure' multilinguals — referring to the use of *various (regional or minority) language varieties* by a mostly urban, largely multi-ethnic, often poorly educated 'working class' across Europe" (Barakos and Selleck 8). While elite multilinguals learn languages to add to their skill set — their *linguistic repertoire* — immigrant multilinguals learn languages for survival. Immigrant plurilinguals are viewed as 'perpetual foreigners,' whereas elite multilinguals are viewed as cosmopolites.

Language ideologies are "discourses in which processes of attribution of value to linguistic forms and practices are inscribed, along with the processes of construction of social difference and social inequality within which they are associated" (Heller, qtd. in Barakos and Selleck 7). Their socially contestable nature means that they contribute to inequality by asserting the bond between language, power, and social structure. Elite multilingualisms have shaped educational programmes, and workplaces, allowed access to services, and simultaneously curtailed them. Neoliberal impulses have led to "the *commodification* of… 'elite' languages… [which] are often (1) constructed in instrumental terms and assigned market value… and (2) viewed as possessing the necessary cultural capital that is needed to succeed in contemporary society" (De Costa 1, italics mine). This

conception of languages as 'skills' means that languages are *reified*, they cease to be a primal human agency and are de-qualified and reduced to their communicative function.

This opens up the possibility of a linguistic hierarchy, wherein some languages are considered more useful than others — pragmatically, commercially, and/or symbolically. Shift in *market demands* can result in shifting values of linguistic repertoires. For instance, Codó and Sunyol investigate the institutionalization of Mandarin Chinese in an elite international school in Barcelona, suggesting that the Englishization of education is no longer enough to secure eliteness (Barakos and Selleck 8). *Native speakerism* is a pervasive ideology in language training that is de-skilling teachers, especially non-language teachers, who become subordinate to native elite language-speaking teachers. Simultaneously, scholars such as Preece highlight the erasure of migrant community languages such as major East Asian languages at the university level, and Peter De Costa states that this is an instance of "minority languages [becoming] casualties in the face of elite multilingualism and neoliberal demands placed on higher institutions of learning" (4).

Jaspers reiterates that "authorities and translanguaging scholars… generally agree that language is key for pupils' success at school and for reducing social inequality — it is only the *type* of language they disagree over… see[ing] standard language competence as crucial to this" (5). Translanguaging scholars simply draw attention to students' right and ability to develop competencies in terms of flexibility and creativity with respect to language varieties and/or fluid language as opposed to the regimented acquisition of languages as mere skills. Students are still evaluated for their linguistic skills in elite monolingual "academic type[s] of language," such that education operates akin to a "social credentialing system" (Jaspers 9,5). Elite education thus architects social hierarchies and stabilizes power structures at national and global levels.

Elite multilingualism has manifold influences in the workplace. We already know this from the gatekeeping effect it produces, effectively warding off access to corporate sector occupations to people without elite education. Yet Maria Rosa Garrido's study of mobile humanitarians' privilege at the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) reveals a new facet of elite multilingualism. In her research she finds that the ICRC expatriate displays a predominance of English-French (and occasionally English-Spanish) bilingualism and is "institutionally *iconized* as international and neutral partly by *anonymous languages*" they speak (Garrido 1). On the other hand, resident staff's languages are deemed as ethnically marked *authentic*

languages (as they are easy to authenticate) and are used to categorize them as 'locals'. These local languages are tested against the standardized benchmarks of elite languages.

"The ICRC rests on the centrality of *communication* and *translation* for its international mandate including protection (e.g. confidential prison visits), assistance (like healthcare) and prevention (diffusion of International Humanitarian Law) in armed conflicts" (Garrido 1, italics mine). Expats who speak elite languages require the cultural and linguistic mediation of local staff, who are viewed as 'technical employees' and are denied direct institutional representation. They are still paid less than a third of the salary allotted to international delegates, despite facing the same dangers as expats and being fluent in the administrative elite languages (Garrido 2-3). This is because expats are adjudged as possessors of *cosmopolitan capital* and constructed as humanitarians within the discourse of *internationality*, and consequently, *neutrality*. Elite languages are thus ideologically constructed as "public, standard and universal voice[s] 'from nowhere'" (Garrido 3).

The principle of neutrality ensures that personnel cannot be assigned "to a country of which they are a national" (Garrido 4). The delegate's detached and 'neutral' role is contrasted with the local interpreter's position, who presumably might be aligned with either of the belligerent sides or have obligations towards them, making them less neutral than delegates. Additionally, while French and Spanish can be used as in-house languages in delegations while traveling Africa and Latin America respectively, working languages such as Arabic cannot secure the same position as lingua franca in a delegation in Baghdad. Thus the ideal ICRC mobile staff is a Western(ized) elite with an "openness to otherness" (Garrido 10). Mobility always has a metapragmatic dimension, Lo and Park state, as it is "facilitated by semiotic processes that link linguistic emblems with speaker images… [v]arious figures of people, including immigrants… refugees… and transnational people… are constantly evaluated and positioned in local contexts through metapragmatic discourse… through [which] their mobile status is understood and interpreted, and situated within hierarchies [of] power" (qtd. in De Costa 5).

There is a similar situation of linguistic hierarchization in India. Despite the naturalization of plurilingual practices and the abundance of linguistic diversity and language maintenance, linguistic inequality is institutionalized in India through the constitutional and statutory recognition of a few of the standardized languages: 22 languages selected as official languages from among 122 major languages grouped by the 2001 Census, not to mention the numerous languages clumped together in the

"other" category. "Speakers of minority and indigenous languages in India are multiply disadvantaged; as a group they are mostly poor, belonging to rural and backward areas […] This contributes to the association of these languages with powerlessness and insufficiency" (Mohanty 137).

While dominant languages are privileged as the official languages in their respective states, authorized as languages of trade and commerce, recognized as media for literary production, and lauded by awards, minority and tribal languages are deprived of similar recognition. Furthermore, few languages other than English and the 22 constitutionally recognized official languages "find a place in the school curriculum either as languages of teaching or as school subjects" (Mohanty 138). Children who speak such minoritized languages are forced to immerse themselves in education in dominant languages, resulting in "a *subtractive effect* on their mother tongue" (Mohanty 138, italics mine). Such an education model is clearly inspired by the elite one, where the standardized 'neutral' form reigns supreme. Language maintenance in the hierarchical multilingualism of India involves domain shrinkage and marginalization of languages to less resourceful areas as opposed to those of greater opportunity such as the marketplace, legal and official domains, and significant inter-group communication. These languages get relegated to private spheres, while elite Indian languages take over the public sphere.

Thus the public sphere refuses to speak for the subaltern subject; it cannot even comprehend when they articulate their desires as their languages have always already been debarred. Thus there is no 'common good' that the public sphere can posit, but only the hegemony of the dominant social groups. This is what Nancy Fraser argues against. She contends that the idea of an "egalitarian, multicultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetoric participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics" (69). Diverse public spheres vaunting equally diverse discursive practices and language varieties must cooperate and collide to allow differing structures of feeling to emerge in society. Only then can the public sphere claim to possess any semblance of an inclusive 'common good'.

Part of this process involves stripping the privileged subjects of the excess power they have been granted via linguistic hierarchization. The aspiration to develop elite cosmopolitan identities and gain entry into the global(ized) public sphere "obscures the issues of inequality that make [such] identities accessible mainly to elites…" and effectively "masks inequality through a discourse of cosmopolitan striving" (De Costa 4). However, the cosmopolitan capital attached to elite

multilinguals also means that their local and national identities are eclipsed by the 'neutrality' and 'anonymity' of the elite languages they wield. To counteract this effacement, we can employ Stroud's put-forward notion of linguistic citizenship, which he describes as "cases when speakers exercise agency and participation through the use of language (registers, etc.) or other multimodal means in circumstances… for transformative purposes" (qtd. in De Costa 5). This involves electing to expand one's linguistic repertoire with a minority/minoritized language, in particular, to gain access to the respective public spheres and cultures mediated through that language and not submit oneself only to the elite and majoritarian languages of power. Understanding linguistic privilege is thus important in undoing linguistic domination.

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