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## BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND BILINGUALISM 62

Series Editors: Nancy H. Hornberger and Colin Baker

# Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages

Edited by

Sifree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook

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Sibusisiwe Dube-Makoni,  
my life-long partner



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## Chapter 10

# After Disinvention: Possibilities for Communication, Community and Competence

SURESH CANAGARAJAH

So where do we go from here? Once we acknowledge that languages are inherently hybrid, grammars are emergent and communication is fluid, we are left with the problem of redefining some of the most basic constructs that have dominated the field of linguistics. It appears that matters like linguistic identity, speech community, language competence and even language teaching are based on constructs of homogeneity and uniformity that we have invented over time. Once these closed systems are taken away, we are confused as to how we can practice language communication.

In a move that will sound paradoxical, I want to argue that in order to find answers for the new questions that emerge after disinvention we have to return to precolonial/premodern societies and the ways language communication was practiced then. In some senses, this is not surprising. It is modernism (and the related movements of colonization and nationalism) that inspired the movement for inventing languages. These movements considered the fluidity and hybridity in precolonial forms of communication a problem and strove to move toward codification, classification and categorization that mark the field of linguistics today. Though post-modernism and post-colonialism have generated a healthy critique of these movements of disciplinary invention (see Hall, 1997; Mignolo, 2000), there is a lot to learn from precolonial communities on how to move forward in addressing the new forms of communication and community that are evolving in contemporary society.

Borrowing from this tradition doesn't mean that we can adopt premodern linguistic practices wholesale. We have to adapt those values and practices to contemporary social conditions. In fact, we have additional resources in the postmodern world to practice these values in more creative and complex ways. So, for example, while premodern societies in my own

locale in South Asia interacted with a few communities living in physical proximity – those speaking Tamil, Sinhala, Malay, Pali and Sanskrit, for example – we can interact with more diverse communities now. In addition to the fact that migration and relocation have thrown distant communities into close proximity, we enjoy the resources of the digital and electronic media to force multilingual interaction. Furthermore, the new technologies also provide expanded modes for mixing our semiotic resources to make communication more efficient (see Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2000). Therefore, we have to imaginatively apply the linguistic values and practices of the past to present day conditions.

Before I outline some of the possibilities for communication, competence and community after disinvention, it is important to state where I am drawing my inspiration from. Many Asian, African and Latin American scholars are rediscovering the ways communication took place in pre-colonial times in their locality. Consider what Khubchandani lists as the dominant traits of indigenous communication in the South Asian context – ‘the essence of Indian plurality:

- (1) fuzziness of language boundaries;
  - (2) fluidity in language identity;
  - (3) identity claims versus language communication; and
  - (4) complementarity of intra-group and inter-group communication.’
- (Khubchandani, 1997: 87)

The implications are profound. Local people are so multilingual, interacting with many language groups in the neighboring villages, that it is difficult to say where one language/group begins and the other ends. In fact, there is so much rampant code switching and mixing that western scholars like John Gumperz developed these constructs of multilingual communication from early fieldwork in India. Kubchandani (1997: 84) argues elsewhere that ‘community’ for local people was based not on unitary languages, but a shared space where many languages live together. In other words, community was conceived in spatial terms, not in linguistic or cultural terms. Therefore, people in India still have difficulties identifying themselves in terms of one language (see Singh, 1998). In each successive census they declare their first languages differently. Moving on to items (3) and (4) in the list, Kubchandani implies that local people managed to keep in tension and to dynamically negotiate competing claims such as identity/communication and inter/intra-group communication without letting them become a source of conflict and disharmony. Their language practices were based on negotiation rather than on fidelity to unitary constructs.

I would like to discuss the options ahead for communicating in English

as an International Language. We have made much headway in recognizing English as a ‘family of languages’ (Crystal, 2004: 40). Linguists now acknowledge that all the varieties of English are equally functional in the postmodern world, jostling against/with each other in complex ways. In fact, the very demography of English is changing, proving that post-colonial speakers of English are more in number and that the language is used more in non-native contexts (see Graddol, 1999). The new models of English posited by scholars like MacArthur (1987) and Modiano (1999) show traditionally dominant varieties such as British or American English sharing the same status as newer varieties such as Chinese English or Bangladeshi English. There are already projections by applied linguists that ‘It may not be many years before an international standard will be the starting-point, with British, American and other varieties all seen as optional localizations’ (Crystal, 2004: 40). The problem, however, is that scholars still see a need for a new common system to enable communication between the different English-speaking communities. There are research undertakings for discovering a lingua franca English (LFE), made up of common elements in the emergent varieties, with traditional native varieties treated as the standard for comparison. Scholars such as Seidlhofer (2004) conceive of LFE as a common dialect that speakers of World Englishes can use to facilitate communication among each other. However, this activity smacks of another form of invention with the traditionally dominant varieties continuing to enjoy power. Can we move towards a radical pluralism, whereby speakers of all local varieties can negotiate their differences for effective communication (and compare Pennycook in Chapter 4)?

To move toward this ideal, we have to first conceive of an English-speaking community that is not based on commonalities. For a long time speech communities have been formed around shared features. The first obvious candidate for this commonality was a shared language or at least a shared grammar system. Needless to say, these communities have been linguistic utopias (Pratt, 1991), positing a commonality that is non-existent. Some may say that linguistic utopias are oblivious to differences and may even suppress differences. But the formation of post-modern multilingual communities has inspired other ways of conceiving community. As people from diverse locations now share the same geographical space, scholars are asking themselves:

Can there be communities without the guarantees of stability? Is the essence of a common language and shared history the only guarantee for a collective identity? ... Communities overlap, abut and adjoin to each

other. What holds them together can rarely be identified by unique values or an exclusive set of characteristics. (Papastergiadis, 2000: 196–197)

This scholar's answer sounds mystical as he posits:

We need to explode the myth of pure and autonomous communities, reject the earlier mechanistic and territorial models of community and present new perspectives on the concepts of space and time which can address the dynamic flows that make community life. There is a need to take a more processual view of power and agency, to note that communities are not just dominated by rigid structures and fixed boundaries but are like a 'happening'. (Papastergiadis, 2000: 200)

This model is not so idealistic when we think of present-day diaspora communities and precolonial multilingual communities. In precolonial times, when Tamils, Sinhalese, Moors and Veddhas lived side by side, this is how they formed communities. They enjoyed overlapping communities, often constructed temporarily for pragmatic immediate purposes. So, for example, there are 'communities' in markets, schools and worship places where speakers of different languages would gather to accomplish common objectives. We have to now imagine how speakers of different varieties of English may form such communities in the postmodern world. Different domains of activity may bring speakers of different varieties of English together to accomplish their purposes.

But how do these speakers communicate efficiently, even for temporary periods, if a common grammatical system is not shared? Here we can learn from the notion of *communities of practice* that enables us to posit shared pragmatic strategies without having to invent common centralized codes (Hensel, 1996; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, what speakers need are ways of negotiating difference rather than codes that are shared with others. Here, again, these are the ways in which multilingual communities (who came with codes that were widely disparate, compared to the varieties of English we are considering here) interacted with each other in precolonial South Asia. Some pragmatic strategies are as follows: varieties:

- code-switching, crossing (Rampton, 1995);
- speech accommodation (Giles, 1984);
- interpersonal strategies: i.e. repair, rephrasing, clarification, gestures, topic change, consensus-oriented, mutually supportive (Gumperz, 1982; Seidlhofer, 2004);
- attitudinal resources: i.e. patience, tolerance and humility to negotiate differences (see Higgins, 2003).

Consider how these pragmatic strategies would help communication between people with different varieties of English or even different languages. As we all know, through code-switching people may strategically deploy even a few tokens from another language to enable communication. Multilingual people come with the communicative competence to interpret these acts of code alternation without being confused by them. Speech accommodation is another strategy that enables multilingual people to inch closer to one another, making modifications in their speech in deference to the other, even as they stretch themselves to understand the difference of their interlocutors. Moving beyond language-based practices, we can even consider social interactional strategies that help communicate through difference. As we can see from the list above, these strategies are not related to the use of codes as in the previous strategies. These are largely extra-linguistic practices that multilingual people use to communicate with each other. In the same vein, we can consider psychological resources that help communicate through difference. Higgins (2003) reports on an interesting research with small groups of native and non-native students, negotiating differences in English language varieties. She finds that non-native students are more successful in interpreting the meanings of words from diverse varieties as they bring attitudinal resources that help them do so. I would argue that these attitudes are the cultural capital of multilingual people, developed through history. Monolinguals fail to develop these resources as they assume the need for similarity in order to enable communication. Certainly, in postmodern communication, such practices are widely in use as speakers from diverse cultures and languages are compelled to interact with one another and achieve common objectives even if they don't share common languages.

If this is the evolving shape of communities and communication in a world of disinvented languages, how do we proceed with language teaching? How do we develop competence in new languages or varieties of English? As is evident in the previous paragraph, we have to develop negotiation strategies among our students. We have to train them to assume difference in communication and orientate them to sociolinguistic and psychological resources that will enable them to negotiate difference. This means that we have to move away from an obsession with correctness. Correctness usually assumes the existence of a common/legitimate core of grammar that can only come about through the practices of invention discussed in this book. This also means that, rather than focusing on rules and conventions, we have to focus on strategies of communication. This shift will enable our students to be prepared for engagement in communities of practice and collaboratively achieve communication through the use

of pragmatic strategies. Our pedagogical objective is not to develop mastery of a 'target language' (that cliché in our field), but to develop a repertoire of codes among our students. We have to develop the sensitivity to decode differences in dialects as students engage with a range of speakers and communities. What would help in this venture is the focus on developing a metalinguistic awareness. For this purpose, we have to shift our attention from mastery of grammar rules, which is the traditional focus of language classrooms. Developing the sensitivity to an intuitive understanding of the way linguistic communication works would help students better in the postmodern world to work through/with the fluidity in codes that they see around them. Through all this, we are helping students shuttle *between* communities, and not to think of only joining *a* community. The latter was the focus in all language teaching. We created the expectation that by learning another language the students would ideally become insiders to a community. We now know that communities don't work that way. There are no permanent insiders or outsiders anymore. All of us are engaged with each other for specific objectives and then disband and form new communities for other needs.

To develop this pluralistic orientation to community, communication and competence, we need to encourage a greater flow of local knowledge from different localities (see Holliday, in press). The wisdom of language practices in precolonial communities shouldn't be ignored. We have to learn how communication worked in contexts of rampant multilingualism and inveterate hybridity in traditional communities, before European modernity suppressed this knowledge in order to develop systems of commonality based on categorization, classification and codification.

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My Life Partner is a 2014 Indian Malayalam drama film written and directed by M. B. Padmakumar. It stars Sudev Nair, Ameer Niyas and Anusree in the lead roles and features Sukanya, Geetha Vijayan and Valsala Menon in supporting roles. The film was produced by Rejimon for Kirthana Movies. The story deals with the deep and intricate emotional relationship between two men, Kiran (Sudev Nair) and Richard (Ameer Niyas). It deals with this subject in a sensitive manner, shedding light on mental attachment