

**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 12 : 1 January 2012**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

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**The Status of Bangla and the English Language in Post-Colonial Bangladesh -  
Resistance versus Utility**

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**Abstract**

There has been a considerable debate in the postcolonial world as to the language choice of the writers, since there is an inseparable connection between language, ideology and identity. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1986) argues that people should write in their ethnic languages to liberate their productive forces from foreign controls. On the contrary, Chinua Achebe is concerned with the pragmatic necessity of English. Bangladesh, being a former colony of Anglophone Empire, is not free from this debate.

In this study, the issues like how a language hegemonizes a community, how the imperial language in Bangladesh operates to re-colonize the mind of people are, addressed. Moreover, the paper examines the present status of Bangla in the face of the spread of English in Bangladesh and leaves the question of resisting linguistic imperialism to be considered.

**Introduction**

Language defines and determines one's place and identity in the world. According to Alastair Pennycook, language is an element of a broad semiotic system and it is formulated and

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infused with ideological, historical and political symbols (Akbari, 2008: 277). Therefore, language does not simply mean a set of sounds. It is completely intertwined with the lives of people. Sometimes, suppression of a language denotes subjugation of a community whereas enrichment of a language ensures the development of a nation (Siraji in Ullah, 2008: 34). A language demonstrates the identity of a person, his culture, values, and worldviews. Thus, using a language means viewing the world in a particular way.

For the last few decades, there has been a considerable protest against linguistic imperialism and hegemony around the world (see Shohamy, 2006 and Myers-Scotton, 2006). However, it is pitiful that in Bangladesh the scope for using Bangla is becoming narrower. In job sectors, multinational companies want their employees to be well-versed in English. People are indirectly being discouraged to learn Bangla, for it does not bring any material benefit. It just reminds us of the colonial education when British rulers patronized one group of Bengali community who mimicked English and excluded the other group who refused to be trained in English (Muhith, 1992: 37). Now questions are naturally raised whether we are being re-colonized by the English language and enriching someone else's language.

### **Colonial Language(s) Versus Ethnic Language(s)**

Language, a source of empowerment, can be used as a tool of exploitation. It is, indeed, a discourse that is powerful enough to dominate a nation (Hasan, 2009: 43). Frantz Fanon (2008) in his foundational book *Black Skin, White Mask* underscores the violent role of a dominant language in shaping identity and culture of a colonized people. He (2008:8) puts it this way—"The negro of the Antilles (who represents every colonized man) will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language". A nation, which possesses a language, possesses the world as knowledge and concepts are expressed and implied by that language. Fanon (2008:9) conceptualizes— "Mastery of language affords remarkable power". Moreover, "language shapes and develops a culture" (Hasan, 2009: 43)—a sensibility that is devastating enough to denounce the culture and custom of a colonized nation within itself.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, an African anti-imperialist writer and activist, denounced English and began to write in his own language. He argues that language has the power to imprison the souls of people. In addition, language is a means of spiritual subjugation. In his book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Wa Thiong'O (1986) recalls his experience in Kenya where English Empire marginalized ethnic languages, and imposed English on the people of that country. In 1952, Kenyan schools were taken over by the colonial regime and English became the language of formal education. In the Kenyan schools, speaking Gikuyu (an ethnic language) was forbidden; those who ignored this order received corporal punishment. In contrast, proficiency in English was rewarded by prize, prestige and applause. Literacy was determined by people's knowledge of the English language.

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Wa Thiong’O (1986:12) states— “thus language and literature [English] were taking us further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds”. They (the English Empire) systematically suppressed Kenyan languages and promoted English language and literature. He (1986:8) thus proposes that African writers should write in their own languages to liberate their productive forces from foreign controls:

“Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages?”

Chinua Achebe (1989), on the other hand, emphasizes practical implications of English in Nigeria. He holds that people with different nationalities can be combined by a neutral language, namely English. For instance, in Ghana, every class contains at least five language-speaking students. In this context, English can be a neutral choice. Achebe quotes from Bentsi-Enchill : “English is . . . the best vehicle for achieving national communication and political unification” (cited in Ashcroft et al., 2006: 271). He seems to believe that imperialism is not the result of disseminating English in India or Africa; European imperialism never forced natives to learn English; rather, people learned this language, considering its practical implications. However, Achebe’s argument effaces the true history of imposition of European languages and the Indian history testifies to such effacement.

### **What is wrong with the choice of language?**

“The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation [to] their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (cited in Hussain, 2007). Language cannot be separated from culture and identity. Linguistic and cultural symbolic system functions as a tool to socialize an individual, shapes his/her perceptions and persona (Kim, 2003). According to Banks, culture is a cluster of attributes such as values, beliefs, behaviour patterns and symbols unique to a particular group (ibid.) and language is the primary instrument in the adaptation and transmission of culture. Bourdieu states that “the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships” (cited in Kim, 2003). Every time we speak, we are negotiating and negotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space (Norton, 2009: 1-2).

Identity is viewed as a plurality construct. It is a person’s concept of the self and her interpretation of the social definition of the self within inner/outer group (Kim, 2003), which is constructed through language and it carries a person’s social position and power relation with society. Poststructuralist’s “subjectivity” concept offers two sets of relationship to understand a person’s identity: in a position of power and in a position of reduced power (Norton, 2009: 2). Some identity positions may limit and restrict opportunities; other identity

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positions may offer possibilities for social interactions and human agency. In Weedon's opinion, a person negotiates a sense of self through language and it helps a person gain access to powerful social networks that give her the opportunity to speak (ibid.).

Language carries axiology and ethics of a particular community; orature and literature affect the perception of people; that is, "how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth" (Wa Thiong'O, 1986:16). It is not possible to express moral, ethical and aesthetic values, using the language of someone else, since language contains the conception of right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean (ibid., p-14). If we separate a person from his own language, he will lose his right to express, and eventually his existence in the world. Furthermore, renouncing one's own language and culture, for whatsoever reasons might be, only results in a state of dislocation and separation, which is akin to a psychotic condition, an identity crisis and national dilemma. A nation will lose its cultural originality if it fails to retain its language property. That nation will consequently be tinged with a sense of inferiority complex and thus try to adopt with the superior language and denounce its culture and identity.

Fanon (2008: 9) truly remarks—

“Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality— finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country”.

### **How does a language hegemonize people?**

“To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (cited in Hussain, 2007). Ives (2004) in his book *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* discusses Gramsci's ideas of language and hegemony. Gramsci views language as political, which is evident in language policy, language education policy and day to day language of people. Hegemony signifies authority, leadership and domination. A group of people can dominate other languages, basing on their economic, political, social, and military power. For instance, capitalist hegemony constructs our everyday lives, emotions and concepts. We depend on language to interpret the world and create meanings. Gramsci's concept of hegemony contains both epistemological and philosophical elements. He states that philosophical arguments exist in common people, but they cannot articulate them. Philosophers use a certain kind of language to express their views and thus confound common people. For example, subaltern groups have their own concepts, worldviews and ideology, but they cannot express them through language. Consequently, they are dominated by those groups who can use language to manipulate others (Ives, 2004: 72-77).

Malhotra (2001) provides us with an interesting example to show how the relationship between language and hegemony works. For instance, the range of a particular word limits

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and restricts our thoughts. In economic context, the word “freedom” means—the freedom to exchange goods and money across borders. Swami Agnivesh, an Indian, questioned the concept of freedom in a conference of World Bank: “Why does freedom or free market not mean to open its borders to people, dismantle all immigrations and passports, in the name of globalization?” Thus the word “freedom” limits our freedom to think beyond what the West allows us to think. Malhotra (2001) puts it this way:

Skillful use of cultural language can and is used routinely to define a belief, subtly denigrate a community, appropriate another's ideas by clever renaming and re-mapping, and assert cultural hegemony over others . . . future norms, prejudices, and social positions among various groups will depend largely on the linguistic framework that becomes standard, making it imperative to participate in the process.

Malhotra (2001) offers another instance to demonstrate the connection between language and hegemony. There is a debate on “Creation” versus “Evolution”. In this debate, if we use English as our vehicle to think, we have only two options: “Biblical creation” and “Darwinian evolution”. We are offered to choose from these two alternatives. But Indian philosophy offers a different view regarding the evolution of consciousness—which is immanent and transcendent in nature. Thus, language excludes and hegemonizes knowledge, thoughts and ideas.

### **Sociolinguistic Condition of Bangla and its Implications:**

The sociolinguistic status of Bangla can be examined in the light of its existing linguistic pedagogic condition and positional relativity with the dominant imperial language. So far as linguistic pedagogy is concerned, the national language curriculum did not make any systematic attempt to raise the standard of Bangla. Although NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) seems to be concerned about the learners’ improvement of four skills, it has failed to introduce any pragmatic methodology to teach Bangla. The process-oriented syllabus of NCTB (Bangla First and Second Papers) is admirable, but teaching and testing system is yet to be adjusted with the curriculum objectives. Siddiqui (2009) points out that the imposition of English at an early age has become catastrophic for the students’ language learning experience. With limited support from academic and sociological settings, learners find it difficult to acquire two languages simultaneously. This phenomenon is not only antagonistic to the cognitive development of the students, it leads to poor output in both L1 (Bangla) and L2 (English). Siddiqui (2009) remarks:

“The result was that by the end of the ten or twelve years of schooling the average students failed to achieve the desired proficiency in the mother tongue: poorly designed textbooks and inefficient teaching caused further damage. Nothing serious was done to raise the standard of textbooks, nor the quality of teaching”.

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Siddiqui's observation coincides with the consequence of Bilingual education policy of Singapore. Reviewing the effectiveness of Singapore's language policy, Wu Man-Fat (2005) points out that the compulsory bilingual education (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil), as introduced in 1966 and 1969, was unsuccessful. Most of the students failed to master four languages simultaneously at both primary and secondary levels. To increase the literacy rate, government had to revise the bilingual education system in which students got the opportunity to learn only one language. Wu Man-Fat's finding (2005) implies that students learn better if they attempt to learn only one language at a time. However, L2 can be introduced gradually as the students grow older.

The other reason that lowered the standard of Bangla can be identified as the official attitudes towards publications. Standard writings and classics of Bangla literature, which are supposed to nourish the young minds, are not available in the market. As a result, the new generation remains ignorant of the best literary works in Bangla and fails to master the language. Siraji (2008:34) argues that without developing and enriching one's own mother tongue (here Bangla), it is a folly to expect national developments. However, most Bengali people tend to ignore this fact.

Any attempt to make Bangladesh an affluent nation would prove to be futile until and unless hundreds of writers, poets, and orators are produced in Bangla and history, philosophy and reference books are written and published in Bangla. Writing in other languages may ensure personal gain, but it will not help in making a developed nation.

We can consider the history of language enrichment and empowerment in the Arab world. When the Arabs started to conquer other countries, they enriched their language (Arabic) by translating history, culture and literature of the conquered. A great deal of books from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Chinese were rigorously translated into Arabic (Siraji in Ullah, 2008: 34). Since the European civilization emerged, books from Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and Sanskrit have been translated into English. English scholars are still working hard to enrich their language by translating books from other languages.

We read Freud, Fanon, Foucault, and Marx in English, since we have not translated these works into Bangla. As a result, our language remains deprived of the vast wealth of new developments in the domain of literature, philosophy, psychology and so on. Our intellectuals seem to be happy with a dwarf bilingual dictionary—that contains only fifty thousand entries (see Bangla Academy Dictionary, 2006).

### **Bangla vis-à-vis English**

Exploration of sociolinguistic condition of Bangla in connection with English gives us an insight into understanding the ethno-linguistic vitality of the Bangla language. Literatures on the sociological status of the Bangla language recurrently blame the elites who appear to have

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negative attitudes towards Bangla. The rich class in the country seems to be interested in learning and enriching the English language.

Ibrahim (2008) states that the oppressed and underprivileged people have witnessed that those who live in posh areas and use luxurious cars do not speak in Bangla. In fact, a privileged elite class in Bangladesh has been formed through education in English medium, and attempts were made to provide an aristocratic space for the existing elites (in Ullah, p-1406). Ibrahim (2008) criticizes the intellectuals who designed the blueprint of blurring the wealth of Bangla and terms them hypocrites (in Ullah, p-1407). They are apparently spokespersons of Bangla, but send their offspring to English medium schools and envisage living in England or America. Most of the people in Bangladesh are nowadays educated in Bangla—but they are excluded from the job market. Only a few people educated in English are exploiting socio-economic opportunities.

Azfar Hussain (2007) rightly remarks:

...there are those deshi Shahebs in our country, ones who even go to the extent of taking pride in asserting that they cannot speak or write in Bangla, despite their Bangladeshi origin and their prolonged Bangladeshi upbringing. Think of some English professors in our country ones who can go on and on talking about staff like south Asian fiction in English, but who cannot tell you, for instance, who a Shah Muhammad Sageer is or who a Pagla Kanai is. Such folks can rightly be regarded as masquerading as the “educated” members of our society. And the lack of knowledge they happily show, full-of-themselves as they are, and the choice of language they make are by no means politically, culturally, and ideological[ly] neutral or innocent.

### **Resistance or utility?**

The apathy of introducing Bangla in every sphere of life unveils our colonized mind and fake aristocracy. Some people feel proud of delivering speeches in English and keep an English book in their hands while traveling by train or plane. They declare boastfully—“I do not read Bangla novels” (Ibrahim in Ullah, 2008: 1407). Besides, the ideological enslavement of English medium students in Bangladesh is reflected in their lifestyle—their choice of literature, music, films, foods, and above all, their way of life. This re-colonization, of course, assists English nations in materializing their agenda of cultural, political and economic domination over peripheral and neo-peripheral countries. Sarker (2003:21) analyzes this fact in Indian contexts:

Needless to say that there is no colony visible here. Since Indians own central and state administrations, they are supposed to hold the liability and authority to devise laws for themselves. The Indian constitution itself determined the language policy. Nevertheless, an invisible power engulfs us as it did during the colonial regime. We are dominated by the notion: “if you know English, you would get prestigious

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jobs”. Formerly, “prestigious jobs” implied government services; however, fairly recently multinational jobs are in vogue. As a result, we are enchained by an internal colonialism economic in nature, which has replaced the former political colonialism (translated from Bengali).

However, can we totally deny the necessity of English? Can we do without English? Can we readily accept Raja Rao when he says: though English is not the emotional make-up of India, it is possible to infuse the tempo of Indian life into English (Ashcroft et. al., 2006: 276)? How can we bridle the monolingual (English Medium) trend of Bangladesh?

We would like to present two propositions. Firstly, our intellectuals can write in Bangla—whether it is research findings, philosophy, or voice of resistance. It will enrich the Bangla language and liberate us from the invasion of the colonizers’ language. If writers feel that global exposure is necessary, they can translate their writings into English. Secondly, to handle the “English Medium School” craze, linguists can propagate the advantages of bilingualism. For instance, Hakuta and Diaz (1985:320-344) in their article provide some research findings, underscoring the benefits of knowing more than one language.

The study of Bian and Yu shows that bilinguals outperform monolinguals while using language as a tool to monitor cognitive functioning and developing their ability to memorize information (in Hakuta and Diaz, 1985:340). In addition, they have more control over various steps in solving a problem. Ben-Zeev’s study (in Hakuta and Diaz, 1985) suggests that bilinguals have better analytical ability. In a matrix transposition task, bilinguals did better at separating and specifying the underlying dimensions of the matrix. Ben-Zeev mentions that “bilingual children seemed to approach the cognitive task in a truly analytic way” (cited in Hakuta and Diaz, 1985: 328). Cummin’s research lends a support for the view that bilinguals have better metalinguistic ability. He studied children’s awareness of the arbitrary nature of language in which bilinguals performed better (in Hakuta and Diaz, 1985). Hakuta and Diaz (1985:322) conclude that bilinguals outperform monolinguals in cognitive tests and subtests—even when group differences in sex, age, and socio-economic stature were carefully controlled. Bilinguals did better in verbal and non-verbal tests, in mental manipulation and recognition of visual stimuli, in concept formation and in symbolic flexibility. So, people may learn both Bangla and English with equal importance, but they must be aware of the ideological and hegemonic characteristics of the dominant language to resist the process of re-colonization.

## **Conclusion**

From the onset of colonization, English became the language of domination and power. Some people of Bangladesh utilized this opportunity and they uplifted the position and prestige of English. As a result, Bangla has been neglected and the “wretched” people who are educated in Bangla receive no attention from the employers. Affluent people are now crazy to send their children to English medium schools, and these children are being brought up with a

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dogma that Bangla is not necessary for them. But it is high time we addressed the issue. Excessive concentration on the language of colonizers is likely to re-colonize the mind of the people. So, mass consciousness is necessary to ensure learning Bangla correctly so that it can broadly be used in the corporate world.

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