## A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

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**Abstract**

The idea of teaching/learning additional languages is a highly context-sensitive one, if only because it hinges crucially on what constitutes one's 'mother tongue'. The idea of mother tongue may seem too obvious to need any further comment; but in *societally* multilingual settings, it is far too slippery to be of any use as a theoretical term. In such societies, which routinely use more than one language for their day-to-day transactions, ordinal ranking of the languages involved as first (mother tongue?), second and so forth is often anybody's guess. The issue is further complicated by the practice of translanguaging, which is becoming more and more common and whose full implications we are only just beginning to get to grips with (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2007; OTHEGUY et.al., 2015; RAJAGOPALAN, 2022). On the other hand, the topic at hand is a hot one in many supposedly monolingual situations where decisions made to introduce additional languages bring with them all sorts of major policy implications and pedagogical challenges, over and above the highly sensitive popular reactions and long-standing prejudices that they often ignite. I shall try to focus on these political sensitivities relating to the topic, seeking to drive home the point that those in charge of overseeing these acts of important educational decision-making should be guided by long-ranging consequences for the collectivity as a whole, rather than that of meeting local or passing aspirations of certain sectors of the population, no matter how sensible they might seem at first glimpse. Needless to say, such discussions will have a direct bearing on what happens in the classroom, which is where these policies are put to the ultimate test as to their viability and their capacity to bear fruit.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue. Multilingual societies. Additional languages.

**Resumo**

**Um ensaio um tanto cético sobre o ensino/aprendizagem de uma língua que não seja a "língua materna": enigmas e desafios práticos sob as lentes do multilinguismo**

A ideia de ensino/aprendizagem de línguas adicionais é altamente sensível a contexto, posto que ela se desdobra crucialmente na questão de o que se constituí na 'língua-materna' de uma pessoa. A ideia de língua materna pode soar como óbvia demais para necessitar de maiores comentários, porém em ambientes *societalmente* multilíngues, ela é escorregadia demais para ser útil como termo técnico. Nessas sociedades, que rotineiramente utilizam mais de uma língua para suas transações do dia a dia, o ranqueamento ordinal de línguas como primeira, segunda e assim por diante é extremamente arbitrário. O problema se torna ainda mais complicado graças à prática de translinguagem que está despontando como cada vez mais comum e cujas implicações derradeiras estamos apenas começando a compreender (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2007; OTHEGUY et.al., 2015; RAJAGOPALAN, 2022). Por outro lado, o tópico em mãos é de extrema importância em situações supostamente monolíngues, onde decisões tomadas a respeito de introduzir línguas adicionais vêm acompanhadas de uma série de decisões políticas e desafios pedagógicos, além de reações populares altamente sensitivas e preconceitos duradouros que elas despertam. Procurarei me concentrar nas sensitividades políticas em relação ao tópico, com o intuito de mostrar que os encarregados de tomar as decisões devem se pautar nas consequências de longo prazo para a coletividade, e não nas necessidades ou aspirações passageiras de setores da população, a despeito de sua razoabilidade aparente. É desnecessário dizer que essas discussões terão impacto direto na sala de aula, onde as políticas são postas à prova e produzem seus resultados.

**Palavras-chave:**
Língua materna. Sociedades multilíngues. Línguas adicionais.

**Resumen**

**Un ensayo un tanto escéptico sobre la/el enseñanza/aprendizaje de una lengua distinta de la "lengua materna": enigmas y desafíos prácticos bajo las lentes del multilingüismo**

La idea de enseñanza/aprendizaje de lenguas adicionales es muy sensible al contexto, pues ella depende crucialmente de la cuestión de lo que constituye una "lengua materna" de una persona. La idea de lengua materna puede parecer demasiado obvia para merecer comentarios, pero en ambientes socialmente multilingües, es demasiado resbaladiza para que sea utilizada como término técnico. En esas sociedades, que de manera rutinera utilizan más de una lengua para sus transacciones diarias, el ranqueamento ordinal de lenguas como primera, segunda, etc., es extremamente arbitrario. El problema queda aún más complicado gracias a la práctica de translenguaje, que aparece cada vez más común y cuyas implicaciones finales estamos apenas empezando a comprender (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2007; OTHEGUY et.al., 2015; RAJAGOPALAN, 2022). Por otro lado, este tópico es extremamente importante en situaciones supuestamente monolingües, donde decisiones sobre la introducción de lenguas adicionales viene acompañada de una serie de decisiones políticas y de retos pedagógicos, además de reacciones populares extremamente sensitivas y de prejuicios duraderos que despiertan. Intentaré concentrarme en las cuestiones políticas respeto al tópico, para demonstrar que los encargados de tomar las decisiones deben tener como base las consecuencias a largo prazo para la colectividad, y no las necesidades o aspiraciones pasajeras de sectores de la población, mismo que parezcan aparentemente razonables. No es necesario decir que esas discusiones tendrán un impacto directo en las clases, donde las políticas se ponen a prueba y producen resultados.

**Palabras clave:**
Lengua materna. Sociedades multilingües. Lenguas adicionales.

# 1. An important caveat and a warning about some conceptual traps in the field we are stepping into

In what follows, I propose to go off the beaten track and present a view of language learning that is admittedly skeptical about a number of beliefs that are widely entertained, tacitly assumed and often actively promoted in relation to language learning in general and the learning/teaching of a language other than one's putative 'mother-tongue' in particular. I conduct this discussion against the backdrop of language learning in multilingual settings – more specifically, settings that are described as *societally* multilingual. A distinguishing trait of societal multilingualism is that the multiple languages that together constitute the multilingual repertoire form a composite whole—a simmering cauldron of what would traditionally be considered different languages—where each of the languages in question attends to a different communicative purpose. All too often, the term 'mother tongue' means precious little to members of such communities (by the way, worldwide these communities outnumber by far their so-called monolingual counterparts) since many of their members have been brought up speaking several languages, often in their very family environments. Let us get started, then, by presenting some initial musings by way of charting the field.

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that, in everyday discussions involving language, certain deeply entrenched beliefs and credos inherited from tradition and, precisely for this reason, hardly ever submitted to critical scrutiny, often hamper genuine advances. The fact that most of this inherited wisdom was based on a reality that is increasingly distancing itself from the world we currently live in only points to the urgency of this proviso, while also underscoring the degree of difficulty that is inherent in any attempt to break free of old habits. We know today that, by and large, most of what the lay person routinely thinks about language had its foundations laid during the nineteenth century – a century that witnessed the consolidation of the concept of the modern nation-state, along with all its conceptual 'accoutrements' such as national anthem, official coat of arms, distinctive currency and, to crown all, a language that it could call all its own.  Unsurprisingly, the ripple effects of this extend to most of our off-the-cuff thinking about any

A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

4

activity that involves language, notably language teaching. And, to make matters worse, seep into our ways of thinking theoretically about language and everything involving it.

## 2. Mapping the terrain

In light of the claim made in the foregoing section, it comes as no surprise that the very idea of 'teaching/learning additional languages' can easily turn out to be a conceptual minefield in multilingual settings. This is so because the term 'additional language' means one thing when pitted against the backdrop of 'supposedly monolingual' settings; it means something else, totally different in multilingual ones, especially those regarded as *societally* multilingual. And let us not forget that, world-wide, it is monolingualism that is an exception to the rule, not multilingualism, as many mistakenly think. Conflating the two or passing over crucial points of difference between them risks cluttering whole field one wishes to zero in on and muddle matters beyond repair.

In order to get a handle on what is at stake, consider the following. Whenever one raises the topic of an additional language, presumably having in mind a supposedly monolingual community of speakers (which is itself a theoretical construct, living proof of past practice of steamrollering into total submission the rights of minorities and silencing them – but let us set that aside for the time being), one is tacitly presupposing that there is a first language, so-called 'mother tongue,' or whatever else one might wish to call it, waiting out there, ready to serve as a foil to it. Well, it is the very possibility of such a reliable foil that societally multilingual settings systematically present and problematise. After all, a rough-and-ready definition of societal multilingualism will necessarily entail that the choice from among the different languages that make up the speakers' overall repertoire reveals itself to be sensitive to and dependent on contexts of use and the specific roles that language users are called upon to play – so that, terms like mother tongue and so forth (part of the familiar stock-in-trade of researchers in language teaching and learning) fade into insignificance for not corresponding to anything meaningful.

A *societally* multilingual environment stands out from other run-of-the-mill multilingual environments precisely for the reason that the different languages that partake in it answer to different and

mostly non-overlapping interactional situations and interpersonal relationships, degrees of intimacy/acquaintance among the interlocutors and so on. Even more glaringly, the former are, as it were, the spontaneous outgrowth of social settings with their complex histories, and differ from the latter which are generally nascent in their formation and mostly the result of different cohorts of migrants coming to share a given geographical space for reasons of a shortage of high-skilled labour, opportunities of commerce, implementation of policies of planned settlement in order to smooth out demographic imbalances and so forth. For a society to be considered *societally* multilingual, there needs to be, in addition to the presence of several linguistically definable cohort groups, stable and active interaction amongst them on a routine basis. Thus, a member of a societally multilingual community will standardly use one language at home, another as they step out of their living quarters, yet another at their place of work and so forth. They do this effortlessly and are often even unaware of it. Effectively then, when one is speaking of a typical societally multilingual context, it makes little sense to refer to a mother-tongue – a term, which in the idealized monolingual context is used to mean something of the order of a comfort language, or the language in which the speaker is fully 'at home', or a language where the speaker is often entitled to feel they have perfect mastery and therefore will never end up in a communicative cul-de-sac or be 'lost for words'.

The choice of one rather than any other from the mix of languages that together form the multilingual's repertoire as the mother-tongue is, as and when this happens, purely a matter of political convenience or expediency. Members of speech communities are often acutely aware of the politics of language that routinely play out and the tensions they often give rise to, as clever politicians exploit them to their own advantage. The very fact that people can switch their allegiance from one language to another at the snap of a finger and all too easily get away with it is itself sufficient enough to call the bluff of 'mother-tongue' and the fanfare with it is announced and promoted. The following case narrated by Mallikarjun (2001, n.p) apropos of India's notorious potpourri of languages and dialects should serve as an eye-opener:

A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

6

> On March 7, 2001, H.Y. Sharada Prasad, Press Advisor to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, wrote in his column, 'All in All,' in *The Asian Age* about a census enumerator who visited his house. His wife "told him that her mother tongue was Telugu and mine was Kannada but that our children had only a mother but no mothertongue, having been born in Delhi and gone to school here without any opportunities to study either of the parents' language. His (the census enumerator's) response was that since they must be speaking Hindi, that would be deemed to be their mother tongue". This story is not new. Most Indians who earn their livelihood outside their linguistic province face this problem every ten years.

Without wishing to prolong this discussion any further, I would like to note that I personally find this whole episode hilarious to say the least and, the same time, a testimony to how unreliable the census figures relating to language in societally multilingual, multicultural nations like India can be – if only for the reason that an attempt is being made here to register as hard and fast facts what should instead be viewed as politically guided preferences.

Before rounding off this discussion of societal multilingualism, it may be useful to note that anyone who may feel tempted at this stage to interject that one should be wary of treating an exception as a rule, or making a mountain out of mole hill, will be well advised to enlighten themselves of the fact that almost the entirety of the continents of Asia and Africa bear witness to the phenomenon in focus – and, together, their overall population is roughly three fourth of the total world population currently estimated to be hovering at 8 billion.

## 3. Venturing into relatively unfamiliar linguistic/communicative terrains

With the caveats and words of caution spelt out in the foregoing sections out of the way, we may now proceed to examine what it means to a typical language learner as they find themselves in linguistically unfamiliar environments. Many who have been through such experiences first hand will readily recall how nerve-racking these occasions can be. For first-timers, it is even worse. It is almost as if they were tele-transported to an alien planet in a matter of seconds and need to come up with the means whereby they may find their way around the predicament they find themselves in.  It is a situation where one either swims or sinks. If one does not already have the skills at hand, well, it is time to come up one on the spur of the moment, to literally invent one. Luckily, people who have been through similar circumstances do come out of them fit enough to tell the story. This only goes to prove that the old adage is dead right: necessity is the

mother of invention. A point to ponder here: perhaps it is high time we adopted this last piece of proverbial wisdom as a standing motto for all language learning/teaching contexts.

But there is, to be sure, a reason for this. There is a lot more that individual, named human languages have in common than what tells them apart. At first glimpse, this may sound strange because, as language teachers and language learners, we are so used to concentrating on what makes languages different from one another than what makes them merely different manifestations of one and the same thing. Let us hasten to grant an important rider to the last word in the sentence just used – language is a 'thing' only because we have agreed to "thingify" it in the first place. Nature itself does not present us with languages as "thingified" ('reified' would be more elegant term, technical in its usage and Latinate in its provenance) entities, ready for us to pounce upon and inspect them to our hearts' content with our inquisitive eyes or dissect them with our analytic scalpels. Or, do whatever else it might interest us to do with them as students and teachers, such as to learn them. This may sound like a rather facetious remark, but it does give us pause for thought. As a matter of fact, there may well be a whole new research avenue hidden beneath it, waiting to be explored.

## 4. The precariousness of named languages

We have long known – and yet, it is never too much or too late to constantly remind ourselves — that individual, named languages in the sense we speak of them today are all invariably products of crucial political decisions made in the past. Languages are, beyond a shadow of a doubt, all political entities through and through. It is politics, and nothing else besides, that prompts individual, named languages, long considered fully consolidated as to their unitary wholeness, to break up all of a sudden into two or more offspring. A language is, as John Joseph (2000, p. 20) famously put it, "a political-linguistic-rhetorical construct."

The destiny of what was once called 'Serbo-Croatian' is case in point. This is how 'britannica.com' introduces it: Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian language (BCMS), formerly Serbo-Croatian

A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

8

language, term of convenience used to refer to the forms of speech employed by Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). The term Serbo-Croatian was coined in 1824 by German dictionary maker and folklorist Jacob Grimm. In the 21st century, linguists and philologists adopted Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS) as a more accurate and comprehensive label to describe the shared tongue[1]. And they add:

> These forms of speech have often been termed "a language," but they are also seen as separate languages: Serbian, Croatian, and in recent years also Bosnian and Montenegrin. Neither view is completely right or wrong; the concept "language" has multiple definitions, and the status of BCMS will depend on the definition one adopts.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are also cases of political calls to fuse distinct languages into a single unified whole. A highly illustrative example that springs to mind is that of Hindi-Urdu (sometimes abbreviated as 'Hirdu'), advocated by linguists in order to bypass tensions over a common language shared by people in India and in Pakistan – Hindi and Urdu being two mutually perfectly intelligible 'independent languages' considered separate on religious and nationalistic grounds (KELKAR, 1968). Just to get our records straight, one may note that 'Hindustani' was Mahatma Gandhi's preferred term for the same thing (a term that failed to gain much traction for the reason that the solution turned out to be part of the very problem instead of a way out of the allegation of seeming to favour one of the two contending parties).

## 5. The oddity of the very idea of '*learning* a foreign language'

It is not uncommon to find in the relevant literature researchers raising their eyebrows over the expression 'learning a foreign language'. They are by no means way off the mark. This is so because their sense of bewilderment has to do with their recognition that the qualifier "foreign" can, if you come to think about with due attention it deserves, only refer to what the language may have been before the process of learning it, never during that process and certainly not after it. In other words, there is something wrong if the language continues to remain foreign even after someone has learnt it. To learn a language, *any* language, is to strip it of qualifiers like 'foreign', 'alien' and the likes of these epithets. To master a

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[1] Available at: <www. britannica.com/topics/Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian-language>. Access: 12 Feb 2023.

language is to *domesticate* it. To put it even more starkly, there is no such thing as learning a foreign language; learning a language is a process of "deforeignising" it or making it one's own in some non-trivial sense.

The point raised in the foregoing paragraph is no inconsequent quibble. Quite on the contrary, it helps unveil a serious misprision that has plagued but has long been passed over in silence in our discussions about language teaching and language learning and has clouded the entire issue in ways that have had long-lasting detrimental consequences. To get a handle on just one of these damaging consequences, consider the following impression that many a language learner is often left destined to carry for years after they have been through the learning process. It is all too often common to come across highly successful and skilled learners of a so-called 'foreign' language complaining that they lack that the "gut feeling" about matters of appropriateness of a given expression in that language which they readily concede to be the sole monopoly and prerogative of the 'native speaker'. What complaints such as the one just alluded to really underscore is how the whole business of language learning is standardly hyped by agencies that do it for a profit. They do it by proclaiming the presence of prized 'native speakers' of the language in question among their teaching staff.

But, as one rips apart the all the sales pitch around the way notably English or any other major international language is propagandised and taught in many parts of the world, what one discovers to one's surprise is that human languages work all too often in ways not dreamt of in the textbooks. People appropriate them to suit their communicative needs. (cf. RAJAGOPALAN, forthcoming). They take charge of the new language they need to deal with and, in the process, adapt it to suit their convenience. There is, in other words, a truly impressive gulf between the linguistic cup and the communicative (and creative) lip.

## 6. The moral of the stories just told

The facts reported, albeit in rapid brushstrokes, in the section above have important implications for the business of language teaching and learning, especially when it is believed that the language that is taught

A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

10

and learned is different from the one that the persons involved already have at their disposals, being in some sense, already 'past masters' in it. Maybe we should avoid getting distracted here about what it all means when what is involved is supposed to be one and the same language. Many die-hard Chomskyans might argue that there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as teaching someone one's own mother-tongue. Mother tongues, they are given to insisting are never taught; they are *acquired* – which in turn is credited with being similar to way toddlers start walking on their own, with no help or coaching from anyone. In the generativist view of language, humans have it in their DNA the propensity to speak a language, provided the child is given the right material environment in which that propensity can come to fruition. More recent theoretical reflections on the topic have introduced into the discussion the concept of emergentism (O'GRADY, 2008), but arguably all that it has done is add some fine-grained nuances to the age-old thesis of innateness.

Back to the question of learning a language other than one's own, then. First and foremost, we need to make sense of what exactly we mean when we pose this question in this fashion. If only for the reason of wishing not to get caught up in such vexatious issues as the one about the putative ownership or otherwise of languages with the consequence of their being treated inadvertently as 'tradeable goods', we could settle on something less controversial as, for instance, to content ourselves with saying that we end up in an uncharted territory language wise. Such admittedly contrived circumlocution may help us look at what exactly is at issue when we ponder the case untrammelled by excessive linguistic jargon and the unwelcome mental straightjacket it may force us into, preventing us from thinking afresh about the whole issue.

The truth of the matter is that exposure to forms of speech, or more generally, of linguistic behaviour one is not fully at home with, is invariably one of gradation, not of an abrupt break. The cline goes all way from partially intelligible dialectal variants to what may strike one, as an initial reaction, as total gibberish. Anyone who greets the statement just made with a disapproving frown may do well to consider the possibility that their 'instinctive' reaction may well be the result of concepts and categories in our discourse about language that have long entrenched themselves in our mindset, with hardly any serious attempt on

our part to interrogate them. But, as was alluded to earlier on, there is at least a *prima facie* case for submitting them to a fresh scrutiny, in the light of our finding that the very identity of discrete, named languages is politically grounded, never guaranteed on a purely linguistic rationale. By the same token, there cannot be any purely linguistic rationale for assuming that, at any critical point, the communicational difficulty one encounters in one's dealings with a total stranger is language-external, not language-internal. In other words, here we are faced with a Gordian knot – a most intriguing puzzle that can only be solved by 'thinking outside the box'.  And the space outside the box has a set of working assumptions. And, to be sure, some of these go against the very grain of received wisdom on the topic.

## 7. The one important takeaway from the foregoing discussion: murmurs from 'outside the box'

Language proficiency comes from 'deforeignising' what initially strikes one as a 'foreign' language. Just as a toddler grows into a language it finds itself surrounded by, so must we grownups. If we grownups find the task cumbersome or unwieldly, it is because the idea that there are distinct languages and the boundary lines that separate them from one another are there for good has taken hold of our mindset. Furthermore, it is simply assumed that these lines of separation are all ironclad, are of natural design and hence insurmountable except with the help of enormous, Herculean effort. The linguist Charles Lamb (2004) proposed a radically innovative way of addressing the issue and, in doing so, jettisoning some of the conundrums of our own making.  This is what I wrote in a review of a volume of his collected papers:

> Lamb argues that "it is actually impossible to define languages as distinguishable objects" (p. 394). Every known criterion that has been invoked to distinguish one language (to wit, appeal to a speech community, mutual intelligibility, possession of distinct grammars etc.) from another fails, not because their proponents have failed to be sufficiently rigorous but because, far from being a discrete entity (as most laypersons and some linguists suppose), language is seamless. So, instead of speaking of individual languages, says Lamb, we should be speaking of 'Language' with a capital 'L', given that there are no boundaries between supposedly distinct languages and "the whole planet is unified, as one human family speaking Language". Furthermore, "It [Language] is a composite of lexemes" and "In principle, lexemes have no regard for language boundaries" (p. 413) (RAJAGOPALAN, 2007, p. 137).

I have been won over to Lamb's signature thesis of starting off with the notion of Language with a capital 'L'. Over and above everything else, it beckons us to consider what we humans have in common from a linguistic point of view. Much the same way as we can affirm that we all have and share (in fact,

A somewhat skeptical essay on teaching/learning a language other than the "mother tongue": conundrums and practical challenges under the lenses of multilingualism

12

are *destined* to share) one Mother Earth, part of a grand scheme of things – or cosmic order, if you like. Then geopolitics takes over and we carve out different territorial units and shed blood to make sure they remain intact forever. But the mere fact that they do shift every now and then, that territories all too often do split up or, contrariwise, merge to form larger units, belies the claim that there is anything sacrosanct about these. Human languages act likewise.

Needless to point out, what we are contemplating here is a major paradigm shift. Such a major change of perspective will enable us to realise that the stumbling blocks we keep seeing in our supposedly interlingual communicative encounters all pale in comparison with the availability of the resources that have always been there at our disposal, but for reasons already hinted at in the foregoing paragraphs, we have not availed ourselves of thus far. If any evidence for this is needed at all, suffice it to look at a gathering of young children, say at a kindergarten, and the ease with which they bond together and, in the process, overcome language-related communicative problems as and when they arise by coining their own nonce words and expressions. This must give pause to wonder why it is that, as adults, we seem to be unable or reluctant to do the same. The only explanation that would suggest itself is the fact that adults are far too punctilious about grammaticality, appropriacy and all the rest of it, that they have been groomed to hold in high regard and reverentially abide by for alleged reasons of social etiquette or elegance or what have you. The Bard couldn't have struck a better note in this connection when he said 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all'! This becomes clearer if we substitute consciousness for conscience (or conscientiousness)! Or better still, self-consciousness in place of consciousness simpliciter.

**Acknowledgement**

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