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Editorial

Home vs School Language Conflict: An Auto-ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

Children from minority communities speaking a different home language from the language of instruction at school face multiple forms of social injustice. I explore the experience of a learner who faced learning hardships when the home language was different from the language of instruction at school. Methodologically, I follow the principles of the autoethnographic approach, reflecting on the nuances of my experience navigating the conflict between home and school language disparities. I connect my anecdotal reflections to show the larger social and political mechanisms, such as policies, laws, and power imbalances that sustain and perpetuate these inequalities. Based on my auto-ethnographic anecdotes, I explore the experience of a learner from the theoretical construct of ideological and structural injustice (Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2010). For this paper, I understand ideological injustice as an unfair treatment of a socially marginalized group by a dominant group based on ideological and social affiliations (Fraser, 2010). It discriminates and further marginalizes members of the socially marginalized group, creating artificial differences in ideas, personal value systems, and social identities, ignoring the intellectual abilities, actions, and characters of marginalized groups. On the other hand, structural injustice arises from deeply rooted social, political, and educational systems (Fricker, 2007). Individuals experience discrimination because of the broader patterns of social inequalities that emerge from social structures, policies and practices (Fraser, 2010), which restrict access to resources and opportunities. This paper contributes to the discourse on language education in the context of South Asia by connecting my reflections to the larger social context for just and inclusive policies. It aims to create awareness to eliminate the challenges of bias and prejudice by dismantling existing underlying social structures and advocating for an equitable and just social system.

Keywords: *Home language, school language, language conflict, social justice, structural and ideological injustice*

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Introduction

In this auto-ethnographic account, I explore the multifaceted issues of injustice that I experienced as a child because I spoke a different language at home from the language of

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instruction at my school. I rely on the theoretical framework of ideological and structural injustice (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007). I am interested in exploring the detrimental effects of conflict on learners like me that result in social inequalities.

Ideological injustice refers to the unfair treatment of a socially marginalized group by a dominant group, based on ideological and social affiliations (Fraser, 2010). It discriminates and further marginalizes members of the socially marginalized group, creating artificial differences in ideas, personal value systems, and social identities, ignoring the intellectual abilities, actions, and characters of marginalized groups. I attended a Hindi-medium school in Manipur, a northeastern state in India. Our class was a multilingual one. At my primary level, most came from the Nepali community, but the language of classroom instruction was Hindi. In addition to Hindi, we had to learn the language of the state, i.e., Manipuri, and English, the international language. My home language was Nepali, and the school's language was first Hindi, and then, gradually, we had to learn Manipuri and English. I encountered an unfamiliar linguistic environment at my school. This unfamiliar linguistic environment at school barred me from actively participating in classroom discourse. This shift from my home language to a different language of instruction at school violated my linguistic human rights (Awasthi et al., 2023). So, my case was one of the forms of ideological and social injustice.

The conflict I had to go through was not unique to my case. Bernhofer and Tonin (2022) report that German- or Italian-speaking children, as their L1, were instructed and took exams in English, German, or Italian. The study found that children taking exams in a non-home language lost 9.5% in their grade points. They argued that this difference impacted the overall academic performance of children because they could not comprehend the classroom content and the language used in classroom instruction. Gradually, these children turn into introverts, alienated, and go for social isolation. I recall struggling to comprehend the text and articulate my understanding in a language I had never encountered before. For me, integrating unfamiliar languages like Hindi, Manipuri, and English into the academic and social settings of the school increased my difficulties in achieving high academic performance, and it also caused unnecessary stress. I had to exclude myself from participating in usual school activities, such as debating competitions and poem recitations, which are vital for personal and academic growth.

Gradually, I learned to speak Hindi after a few months, as it was not much different from my mother tongue, since both evolved from the same parent language, namely Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) languages. However, there were enough instances of bullying my accent and grammatical errors. I still recall the stereotypical gender marking in Hindi and the phonemic differences between long and short vowels. These phenomena are not prominent in Nepali grammar. My peers often laughed at me when I said, '*shaam hota hai*' (it becomes evening), i.e., with a masculine gender marking on the verb. Later, I learned that Hindi has gender marking for inanimate objects and abstract concepts, such as *shaam* (evening). I felt insulted when they laughed at me for such minor linguistic issues. As an introvert, my linguistic exposure was limited, and my peers took my limitations further to perpetuate bullying. This continuous bullying excluded me from the usual exposure to social interaction. Consequently, I was unable to access the educational and social opportunities to which I was entitled as a student.

Gradually, the dominant languages of school restricted my freedom of expression, critical thinking, and discursive participation in classroom interactions (Fraser, 2010). The members of mainstream linguistic groups, as well as students and teachers, perceived my accent and social values as stereotypes. I felt disparaged, dehumanized, and finally marginalized (Fricker, 2007). This process of stereotyping and dehumanization perpetuates

disparities in accessing the resources available in the community due to power dynamics. This process ultimately results in systematically depriving individuals of opportunities (Fraser, 2010). This systematic deprivation of prospects leads to structural injustice. Structural injustice arises from deeply rooted social, political, and educational systems (Fricker, 2007). I experienced discrimination due to the broader patterns of social inequality. These patterns of inequality arise from social structures, policies, and practices (Fraser, 2010).

I adopt an auto-ethnographic approach to understand the nuances of a learner's experience when facing conflict due to a language difference between their home language and the language of instruction at school. I reflect on personal narratives to capture my experiences of encountering several facets of injustice. I share my stories of struggles with the hope of raising awareness about the deep-rooted social injustices embedded in our education system and advocating for inclusive and equitable educational practices so that no child will suffer as I did.

I am particularly interested in how an individual is systematically marginalized because of his/her social identity as a member of a linguistic community. Social and political mechanisms such as policies, laws, and power imbalances sustain and perpetuate these inequalities. In this way, these social mechanisms exclude the indigenous communities, barring their social identity. To address structural injustice, discriminatory policies and laws need reform to promote inclusive policies and challenge biases and prejudices by dismantling underlying social structures and advocating for an equitable and just social system.

Structural and Ideological Injustice

Structural and ideological injustices systematically marginalize individuals, particularly from minority communities, barring them from mainstream social platforms. Sociocultural and political mechanisms, such as policies, laws, and power imbalances, perpetuate these conditions (Fraser, 2010). These mechanisms exclude and suppress individuals from minority communities, impeding their social identities and leading to social inequalities (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007).

Structural injustice emerges from social, political, and educational systems. An individual feels discriminated against because of broader patterns of inequality that arise from the structures, policies, and practices. These injustices create patterns of discrimination and inequality, hindering the personal growth and well-being of individuals of marginalized communities (Fricker, 2007). Discriminatory policies and laws require reform to overcome exclusion and further marginalization, thereby creating a just society. We need to dismantle deep-rooted social structures to overcome these biases and prejudices and establish a just society (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007).

In this paper, I examine the structural and ideological injustices that learners face when their home language differs from the language of instruction at school (Fraser, 2010). Ideological injustice refers to unfair treatment based on ideological beliefs and social affiliations. Individuals from minority communities are discriminated against and marginalized based on their ideas and personal and social values, but not on their intellectual abilities, actions, and characters. When a child speaking one particular home language encounters a different, unfamiliar language at school, they face discrimination in socialization due to their lack of proficiency in the school language. He is unable to participate actively in classroom discourse. Consequently, his inefficiency in the school language results in isolation and alienation. Over time, he struggles to participate in classroom discourse; he gets bullied for his accent and grammatical errors, leading to further alienation and exclusion from

opportunities like debating or poetry recitation competitions, which are prerequisites for his personal growth and well-being.

Gradually, the dominant ideologies erode the oppositional ideologies, limiting freedom of expression, critical thinking, and open discursive participation, while silencing and marginalizing them. Dominant ideological groups consider opposition ideological beliefs of marginalized groups as stereotypes, disparagement, and dehumanization. This process of stereotyping and dehumanization results in disparities in resource access because of power imbalances, leading to systematic deprivation of opportunities.

The construction of structural and ideological injustices is the product of strategic and planned processes of the dominant group over time. In the following paragraphs, I discuss this process by drawing on the concepts of colonial elitedom (Thiong'o, 1986), hegemony, organic intellectuals, and false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971).

The dominant group imposes its ideological belief systems on the minority groups. The language of the dominant group functions as an instrument of this process. Imposing an unfamiliar and culturally different language and its values on learners who speak a different language from that of the dominant group invades the learners' mental universe. This imposition is often deliberate and instrumental in undervaluing and destroying indigenous people's cultural and intellectual practices, as manifested in Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education of 1835 and in educational policies such as Wood's Commission (1956) in Nepal. Thiong'o (1986) conceptualizes this process of undervaluing people's culture by imposing other cultural values as colonial elitedom. He argued that a Kenyan student could graduate from school without any knowledge of their community's language, culture, and belief systems, but could not without having high proficiency in English.

The colonial elitedom produces organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). In the South Asian context, Macaulay's Minute of 1835 (Macaulay, 1972) exemplifies colonial elite domination and organic intellectuals. Macaulay's class and Thiong'o's colonial elite produce organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). Members of civil society, such as teachers, professors, managers, and bureaucrats, are examples of organic intellectuals. These intellectuals act to extend the dominant ideology to different sections of society. Since the ideological system of the dominant group produces these intellectuals, they disparage the indigenous belief and knowledge systems and prioritize and authenticate those of the dominant group. This process creates a false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971), i.e., disparaging cultural and linguistic knowledge of the local communities and the superiority of the cultural values of dominant groups.

Over time, this discourse of false consciousness convinces the ordinary people of local communities of the hegemonic ideology of the dominant group. An attachment of organic intellectuals to the dominant group's ideology benefits them due to their higher social capital and additional economic security (Poudel, 2022). Consequently, these intellectuals, i.e., professors, social leaders, and activists, continued instilling the dominant group's ideology. Ultimately, the dominant group's ideology shapes all decision-making processes in policymaking across various sectors of society, including education. On the other hand, the language, belief, and cultural systems of minority groups never create a decisive discourse because their discourse is subjugated.

Language Disparity: A Process of Marginalization Barring Classroom Interaction

Language disparity occurs when a dominant group fails to recognize the language of minority groups, marginalizes their members, and limits opportunities based on their linguistic background. In an educational setting, when students, particularly those from

minority communities, struggle to gain equal access to language resources and opportunities because they speak a different language from the one used in the classroom, language disparity occurs (Phillipson, 2016; Recento, 2006). Because of the hegemony of the dominant group, their language holds a privileged status in the educational setting. It systematically excludes creating barriers for the underprivileged group to participate in the educational process (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Language disparity devalues the indigenous languages and marginalizes them, and the marginalization further leads them to limited access to mainstream education and reduced opportunities for higher academic achievements.

In multilingual societies, language disparity is a common phenomenon. Minority languages lack the social and economic capital of dominant languages. To eradicate this linguistic injustice, policies should ensure educational access regardless of one's linguistic background.

> Learning begins at home, so the language I use to communicate with my family and friends affects my academic achievements at school. Therefore, continuing our formal education at school with that language is a prerequisite. However, in my case, this did not happen. We were a small minority community where we resided. The members of my community did not speak my mother tongue or home language in the larger social space. As a result, my mother tongue had no chance against the language of the school I attended. Consequently, my school language differed from my home language, i.e., Manipuri, the state language. I had to struggle to master the language in order to participate in classroom discourse. My lack of proficiency in the school language hindered my communication with my peers and teachers.

I faced a significant challenge in my academic life due to the difference between my home language and the language of academic instruction in school. To understand this challenge, I looked into Fricker (2007) and Fraser (2010) for their theoretical constructs of structural and ideological injustices. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) introduced me to the concept of colonial elitedom, and I drew on Gramsci (1971) for the concepts of hegemony, organic intellectuals, and false consciousness. In my case, the conflict between my home language and the school language significantly disrupted my educational achievement. I understood that my home language is a prerequisite for academic progress because transitioning from my home language to the school language was not always easy for me.

Since I came from a minority linguistic community, my community did not share its home language in the larger social space of my immediate community. As a child, when I left my home for school, I found a different social and linguistic space in my school premises that further marginalized me. At my primary level, the language of instruction at school was Hindi, and my immediate social environment used Manipuri for daily survival. This sudden linguistic transition significantly challenged my academic performance in mastering the language and effectively engaging in classroom discourse.

Examining the analysis of language disparity through the theoretical framework of structural and ideological injustice, I gained insight into the role of power dynamics, particularly linguistic power dynamics, at play. The dominance of Hindi in educational settings and Manipuri in social spaces limited my academic performance and socialization process in the broader social context. As Thiang'o (1986) argued, historical colonial patterns limit an individual's social and academic life through the imposition of dominant languages. After the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949 (Government of India, 1949), Hindi was imposed on the people of Manipur in the name of national integrity. The inclusion of English in school curricula with high priority is a manifestation of the linguistic hegemony

of the British *Raj* (Poudel, 2021). These linguistic situations disregarded my personal linguistic and cultural rights, further marginalized me, and perpetuated the cycle of marginalization and linguistic assimilation.

My teachers functioned as the organic intellectuals and perpetuated the concept of false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971). They instilled in the consciousness of young children that Hindi, Manipuri, and English had higher values for academic and personal life. The high values attributed to these dominant languages created a distinct space in my consciousness and perpetuated a negative attitude toward my language and culture, including food and dress.

I suffered from an inferiority complex because I felt excluded from the mainstream, as this impeded effective communication between myself, my peers, and my teachers in classroom discourse. This inferior complexity and feeling of exclusion hindered my academic progress and challenged me to integrate into the academic environment. Now I realize that to address these issues, academic spaces need to foster an inclusive educational environment that respects the linguistic and cultural rights of individuals from minority communities.

Reflecting on the dark memories of my primary school in a rural school in Manipur, a NE Indian state, the majority of my classmates experienced the same trauma that I went through. My 30 classmates came from diverse linguistic backgrounds and spoke more than 15 different languages. They also faced the issue of language disparity in classroom discourse, as well as teachers' attitudes towards ethnic languages and cultural systems. Hindi and Manipuri were the languages of our books and teachers, respectively. Only a few of us spoke these languages fluently. Examining this language disparity through the theoretical lens of structural and ideological injustice (Fraser, 2010; Fricker, 2007), I reflect on my experience to consider the implications of dominant languages and classroom power dynamics. My teachers, who spoke the dominant languages, used these languages for classroom instruction and discourse. Consequently, several of my peers and I, as speakers of minority languages, remained passive in classroom interactions. This classroom situation forced us to engage in rote learning and take exams without fully understanding the content taught in the class.

The language disparity I experienced in my school life reflects the operation of structural injustice. The dominant languages, i.e., Hindi and Manipuri in the early stage and English in the later stage, made it difficult for minority language-speaking learners like me to participate actively in classroom activities (Fraser, 1997; Flicker, 2017). The social power dynamics of the educational system perpetuate inequalities by excluding learners who do not possess the necessary linguistic competence in the dominant languages, as the prevalent power dynamics rarely prioritize their languages in classroom discussions.

In my case, dominant languages like Hindi, Manipuri, and English restricted my educational opportunities and resources, a form of ideological injustice. The state machinery created colonial elitedom through its educational system, and that system produced organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971). My teachers, the representatives of organic intellectuals, imposed their ideology on minority groups. My teachers perpetuated the false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971) that dominant languages, such as Manipuri and Hindi, were essential for understanding the functions of the state at both local and national levels. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of English, arguing that quality education was only attainable through the English language. This continuous reinforcement of a false consciousness created a feeling of hatred toward indigenous languages. They gradually exclude these minority children from mainstream social consciousness because of their incompetence in dominant languages.

My anecdote is evidence of the consequences of language disparity that minority students like me face limitations in active engagement in classroom discourse. As a result, the teachers monopolized the discourse, perpetuated our silence, and caused an imbalance in classroom talking time. We were forced to engage in rote learning and write exams reproducing the text we never understood, because we were not equipped with the necessary language skills required for classroom discourse (Fraser, 1997; Flicker, 2017). As a result, the structural system hindered my ability to communicate with my peers and teachers, impacting my academic performance. In the present state, educational institutions and, more importantly, teachers can help dismantle language disparity, promote linguistic justice, and create equitable educational opportunities that respect the values of all linguistic communities.

The Power of Home Language: Imparting Educational Values and Social Concepts

Home language is crucial for the cognitive development of a child (Hamuddin et al. 2025). It shapes cognitive growth and academic success. However, when the home language does not get its space in academic activities in schools, the child is deprived of cognitive development. In my case, I had to make a transition from Nepali to Hindi, Manipuri, and English. A person's home language or mother tongue enables them to think critically, express emotions, and develop an understanding of the world around them. However, when I entered the educational system, which prioritized Hindi as the instructional language and Manipuri as the dominant social language, I encountered significant challenges.

The transition from home language to a different school language hinders one's ability to engage in classroom activities and discourse, which are essential for developing language ability and cognitive maturity (Wells, 1980). At the age of three, children can communicate with their family members about their immediate environment, food, and other children's daily activities. This proficiency in their home language serves as the foundation for learning at school. However, in my case, the school language was alien to my experience, and it hindered me from participating in daily classroom activities, such as engaging in classroom discourse, asking questions when concepts were not understood, and barely understanding the teacher's instructions. As a student from a minority community, I found that my cognitive skills, developed through my home language, became disconnected, and I struggled to bridge the gap between the skills of my home language and the school language, which impacted my academic performance (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009).

The classroom was not a comfortable space for me. I felt marginalized because everyone was alien to me; I could not communicate with my classmates or my teachers. While anecdoting my childhood experience today, I sense that my experience was a case of epistemic injustice, particularly a testimonial one (Fricker, 2007). In the classroom discourse, I always struggled to communicate in the dominant language, and many times I failed to convey what I wanted to my peers and teachers. This situation devalued my contribution to the process of knowledge generation through classroom discourse and led to the development of an inferiority complex and alienation. As a result, I remained silent, even though I felt my ideas were significant in advancing the discussion. Continuous insistence on Hindi or Manipuri from the school administration and teachers put me in a situation of linguistic exclusion, isolating me from the mainstream discourse.

For mainstream discourse of the dominant languages, the language disparity discussed above could be a source of emotional toll (Canestrino et al. 2022). However, for me, my mother tongue is not just a tool for communication; it is my identity, the very essence of who I am. This language connects me to my family members, my cultural past, and my inner self. The refusal of minority languages like Nepali to be acknowledged in my school curriculum is

an act of denial of the indigenous knowledge system, a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The dominant languages gained prominence in the school curriculum because they were considered superior, thereby limiting the use of minority languages that were required for social mobility. I describe the phenomenon as false consciousness, borrowing a concept from Gramsci (1971). These forms of false consciousness and epistemic injustice reinforce the children of minority communities' further exclusion in the wider social space.

Reflecting on this, the implications of linguistic hegemony become clear. The state's educational policies, which favored Hindi and Manipuri, mirrored a larger structural injustice that excluded minority-language students from full participation in society. Excluding a large number of children from speaking their mother tongue leads to linguistic genocide through rapid language shift (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). In my case, this exclusion had a significant impact on both my academic performance and personality.

I understand my experience was not unique. More than 50% of my classmates came from minority communities and spoke a language that was not intelligible to one another. In a class of 30 students, we spoke more than 15 languages. Like me, these students relied on rote learning and memorization for their exams. I never realized that a lesson is to be understood and has a practical use in our daily lives. The structure of the education system in the early 1970s excluded the voices of minority linguistic communities, a case of structural injustice (Fraser, 2010). In a case of linguistic structural injustice in a school context, the class conducts academic activities in the discourses of dominant languages, and learners from minority communities remain passive listeners, as their language is not acknowledged. Today, I feel that if my home language had been incorporated into my school environment, I would have been a different person, not an introvert, but a loud extrovert. Therefore, excluding my home language from the educational space is a case of broader social and ideological exclusion, carefully designed through educational policies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I looked into the issues of structural and ideological injustices (Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2010) in educational spaces within a rural school setting in Manipur, an Indian state, during the 1970s, drawing on anecdotes from my own schooling. As seen through the lens of power dynamics and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), the dominance of Hindi and Manipuri in my educational context perpetuated linguistic marginalization, similar to colonial language policies (Thiong'o, 1986). This disparity created barriers to my active participation in classroom discourse, hindering my academic progress and social integration. Recent studies, particularly those by Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) and Phillipson (2016), highlight the need to promote linguistic justice in our educational policies to protect the linguistic rights as indicated in Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015). Multilingual education and support for indigenous languages are crucial in mitigating the effects of language disparity, enabling students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to fully participate in educational processes and increase their chances of academic success.

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