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Language Conflicts in Social Arenas: Reflections for the Business World

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Abstract
This paper argues that our understanding of the issues related to language conflicts inside business organizations would be enriched by close analysis of the conflicts that take place in the larger arena of the social sphere, of which the business organizations are a part. Taking clues from earlier studies, the paper argues that the prime reason behind linguistic conflicts is the fear of loss of linguistic identity by the linguistic minorities. It is further debated that the same factors related to the loss of linguistic identity would play a role in the business arena as well where the official language of the workplace puts its native speakers in an undue advantageous position with respect to other members who have learnt the official language as their second language.

Keywords
India, linguistic conflicts, linguistic identity, multinational corporations, Pakistan, social conflicts

Introduction

Studies done in the field of sociolinguistics and political sciences have found that 'conflicts can be brought about by changes in an expanding social system when there is contact between different language groups, (Inglehart and Woodward, 1967); these conflicts arise from the confrontation of differing standards, values, and attitude structures, and strongly influence self-image, upbringing, education, and group consciousness (Nelde, 1997: 285–300). The present paper closely analyzes five major linguistic conflicts that plagued India and Pakistan during the period 1950–70. The paper details why and how the conflicts occurred, what were the demands of the conflicting group, and the outcomes of the conflicts. Taking clues from earlier studies, the paper argues that the prime reason behind linguistic conflicts is the fear of loss of linguistic identity, and a feeling of marginalization by the linguistic minorities. It is debated that the same factors related to the loss of linguistic identity would play a role in the business arena as well, where the official language of the workplace puts the native speakers of the official language in an undue advantageous position with respect to others who have learnt the official language as their second language.

The number of ethnic conflicts that the world faces is very large – most of these conflicts arise because a group of people feel that they are being marginalized and hence cluster together to

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acquire a singular identity based on common characteristics such as language, culture, religion, socio-economic and political status, or geopolitical history. The reason(s) behind the conflict could either be related to the individual (equality of citizenship) or group rights (cultural rights, institutional political recognition, or secession) which the marginalized group demands (Coakeley, 2003). Quite often the demand is related to an admixture of both individual and the group rights. In the next few sections, the paper will focus on five major conflicts that had roots in the linguistic marginalization of one or more communities sharing a common characteristic – language background.

Both India and Pakistan are characterized by rich linguistic diversity. Both countries have declared a foreign language – 'English' – as the official language of the country (in India, English is the associate official language) indicating that the idea of the two nations does not rest upon a common linguistic identity (Amritavalli and Jayaseelan, 2007). Both the nations have laws to protect the linguist minorities and their constitution acknowledges and supports linguistic pluralism. However, this respect for linguistic plurality has some dark spots in the history of the nations – the dark spots did not only help the two nations redefine their linguistic identity but, in the case of Pakistan, redefined the territorial boundaries of the nation as well. In the next few sections, the paper discusses such dark spots – five conflicts, agitations, and riots that were fuelled by the fire of language differences.

Before we move forward, it would be worth noticing that linguistic identity is a constructed identity; that is to say, languages by their character cannot define a group identity wherein the group consists of a reasonably large number of speakers spread through a geological or social territory: languages are classified as being existent in a continuum of dialects or the vernacular wherein the shift from one dialect to another is a gradual one (Lodge, 1993: 230; Milroy, 2000). Although a detailed discussion of how and why the shift from vernacular to the standard happens would be outside the purview of the present paper, it would be worth noticing that language standardization is carried on in society for different socio-political reasons (Fitzmaurice, 2000). Once language standardization is percolated through the speech community, an identity based upon a common language background is constructed.

Linguistic Conflicts in the Social Arena – Focus on Pakistan

Language Riots in Pakistan Post 21 February 1952 Firing

Pakistan saw major unrest in its eastern part where a movement was taking shape – the movement was essentially a push for separation of the eastern part of Pakistan from Western Pakistan on the basis of a linguistic divide (West, 2009: 101). Immediately after the creation of Pakistan on religious grounds, new voices were heard both on the literary and political scene, challenging the division of people on religious background: the commonality of language, history and culture of all Bengalis (speakers of Bengali language), whether Hindu or Muslim was emphasized (Natarajan and Nelson, 1996: 69–70). As Natarajan and Nelson (1996: 69–70) note, the emphasis was in tune with the quest for a common identity (independent of religion) among the Bengali speaking people of East Pakistan on the basis of a common cultural and linguistic background.

The Prelude. In West Pakistan, the people from East Pakistan were looked down on as inferior: their image was that of a community of less pure Muslims which spoke a deficient language that was not written in the Persian–Arabic alphabet (DeRouen and Heo, 2007: 593–594). This gave rise to resentment among the Bengalis who, apart from acquiring elements of rancour arising out of language issues, had hard feelings related to domination of the administration, the armed forces and police services by West Pakistanis. As Ganguly (2006) notices, the representation of people from East Pakistan in the civil service of Pakistan and the armed forces was a heavily lopsided one. The number of Bengalis in civil administration was meagre: at the time of partition just one out of a total of 95 members in the Indian civil service who opted for Pakistan (Braibanti, 1966: 365–366). Similarly, the number of military officials who were Bengalis was close to 1%. While Pakistan tried to mend these skewed ratios through a policy of ethnic preferences in employment, such policies were not implemented as far as Military recruitment was concerned, and the representation of Bengalis in Pakistan Military was restricted to less than 4% even in the year 1955 (Humayun, 1995). Even in the political arena, the selection of Urdu-speaking Khwaja Nazimuddin added to the resentment of the Bengali population, who felt it was a ploy to deny their political birthright by the West Pakistanis who commanded the political power in Pakistan (Charles, 2003). Moreover, as the Pakistani government did not give any official language status to Bengali language, a profound concern for identity arose among the Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis (Dixit, 2002: 129–130). The language riots that ensued not only asserted the need for cultural identity but also expressed the restricted access to employment opportunities in administrative services because of the lack of fluency of Bengali speaking people in the Urdu language (Sisson and Rose, 1990: 10).

The Riots. The first language riots in Pakistan happened after a procession of students outside the Provincial Assembly in Dhaka was fired upon on 21 February 1952. The students were demanding recognition of Bengali as the official language of Pakistan. The day (21 February 1952) was declared as a general strike day by the East-Pakistan based political party ‘Awami League’ to press for the demand of recognition of Bengali as the additional official language of Pakistan along with Urdu (DeRouen and Heo, 2007: 593–594). The country-wide protest that followed the firing on the students finally helped the Bengali language gain the recognition of the second official language of Pakistan; the fateful day (21 February) was declared as ‘International Mother Language Day’ by UNESCO in 1999.

The language riots not only resulted in the immediate granting of official language status to the Bengali language; it gave a new identity to East Pakistan based on a common linguistic background. The major long-term effect of the language riots was the secession of East Pakistan from West Pakistan, which unfortunately did not happen before a civil war took place, costing thousands of life, with some reports estimating even 3 million casualties (DeRouen and Heo, 2007: 586).

The Issue of Power and the Extreme Effects of Language Policies

The reason behind the elevation of Urdu to the status of national language of Pakistan lay not in its numerical strength but in its socio-political status. Urdu was spoken by a very small minority, concentrated in the urban areas, while the Bengali language was spoken by little more than half of the total population with almost all of this population living in the eastern part of the country (i.e. present day Bangladesh). Even in present day Pakistan, Urdu is spoken by a very small minority which remains concentrated in the urban areas (Rahman, 2006). An argument that goes in favour of continuing with Urdu as the official language is related to its symbolic role in resisting ethnicity in Pakistan: Rahman (2006) reasons that the rationale behind continuing with Urdu has been the concern for having a unified Pakistani identity – Urdu serves a symbolic role in resisting ethnicity which would otherwise break the federation. While the validity of such rationale can be debated, it would be worth pointing out that, in the secession of East Pakistan from West Pakistan, we observe the furthest effects of language policies.

Bangladesh is a clear example of the extreme effects of linguistic policy: Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Governor-General of Pakistan, had made a language policy declaration that 'Urdu and only Urdu' would be the national language of Pakistan, that too when Urdu was spoken only by the elites of West Pakistan (Bianco, 2010). Furthermore, the language policy had no provision for any other official language; this gave rise to a fear of insecurity among the Bengali-speaking people of East Pakistan. It comes as no surprise that, once East Pakistan got its distinct identity as a nation, Bengali was made the official and the national language of Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and the Bangla Academy was created that was entrusted with the continual elaboration and promotion of the Bengali language (Bianco, 2010).

Linguistic Conflicts in the Social Arena – Focus on India

Turning now to India: the situation regarding language differences in India was even more complex though it was not marked by strong secessionist demands. On the language front, the independent India had an extreme form of linguistic diversity at its disposal: the 1951 census reported 845 languages or dialects spoken in India. However, many of the reported languages had only a limited number of speakers. As Dasgupta (1970: 33) reports, 87% of the total Indian population had been classified as speakers of the 14 major languages, specified in the original eight schedules of the constitution of India, and the English language.

Pro-Telugu Language Riots following the Death of Potti Sriramulu – 1952

The language issue in India, although recognized as an important issue by both the father of the nation 'Gandhi' and other freedom fighters, surfaced with the death of Potti Sriramulu (on 16 December 1952), who went fast-unto-death for linguistic reorganization of the Madras Presidency and the creation of a separate state for Telugu-speaking people (Sreeramulu, 1988: 225). The language riots and the subsequent formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh for the Telugu speaking people started a chain reaction for many movements throughout the country: soon the Indian government had to go for reorganization of the states on a linguistic basis (Hoiberg and Ramchandani, 2000: 80–81), the death of Potti Sriramulu acting as a catalyst for the reorganization (Adeney, 2007: 131).

Anti-Hindi Agitation in Tamilnadu – 1965

While the riots following the death of Potti Sriramulu were designed to support the cause of the Telugu language, the language riots in Tamilnadu were against the government promotion of the Hindi language. Though the language policy of promoting Hindi in government offices was worked out much earlier, it had opposition right from the beginning, especially from those hailing from southern parts of India (Time, 1949). Nonetheless the anti-Hindi movement was not a big movement right from the beginning: in fact many of its supporters had been in favour of promoting Hindi as the sole official language of India and the gradual phasing out of English by 26 January 1965 (15 years from the commencement of the Indian Constitution), but as the day came closer and the central government insisted on the promotion of the Hindi language, the major political party 'Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam', which had risen to power on the anti-Hindi wave, pitched its voice in support of Tamil and the English language, and took the matter to the streets (Amritavalli and Jayaseelan, 2007; Ramaswamy, 1997: 168–178). The rest is history: English continues to be the associate official language of the nation and has dominated the domains of power – the judicial, military and civil administrations.

It has been argued that the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamilnadu got wider support as it was admixed with the Anti-Brahmin movement that had been going on since the 'Self-Respect Movement' by EV Ramaswamy Naicker, an apt political figure and an esteemed social activist (Srinivas, 1966: 105). The movement despised anything that shared an identity with the Aryan race and the Sanskrit language (Amritavalli and Jayaseelan, 2007). As Hindi is considered a descendent of the Sanskrit language, the language associated with the Aryans, it was obvious that the Anti-Brahmin movement would take a linguistic colour as well (Ramaswamy, 1997: 24–33).

Changing Language Equations to Gain Social Mobility. As Srivastava (1979) identifies, the nature and pattern of the anti-Hindi movement were related to apprehension connected to the social and economic growth of a speech community as a social group. If a speech community perceives that its social and economic growth could be hampered because its mobility in the domains of power would be impeded by its limited control of the language used in those domains, the speech community would try to change the equations. The planned promotion of Hindi would have given its native speakers an undue advantage over non-Hindi language speakers. Moreover, as a language that offers entry into the domains of power, it would be used by individuals in pursuit of their advantages (Schmidt, 2000: 205–206); the promotion of Hindi in government offices would have made it a lucrative language to those who wished entry into the domains of power – in such a situation Hindi would have dominated all other languages including Tamil, and would thus have threatened Tamil speakers' identity.

The Fight for Official Status. In modern industrial society, language becomes a passport to power as most jobs require proficiency in the language used in the domains of power (Rahman, 2002). In this way the social mobility of any speech community can be altered by changing the language equations. In all the five cases discussed in this paper, the speech community was making a demand on the state to raise the status of their language so that the power equation could be tempered. As the government is the main source of jobs and government jobs are considered ladders to social mobility and elevation, it was but obvious that speech groups would fight to get their language declared as the official language of the state (Srivastava, 1979).

Anti-Bengali and Pro-Assamese Language Riots in Cachar (Assam) – 1960

Our focus now shifts to the north eastern part of India: the north east has been a troubled periphery right from the very conception of the Indian Republic (Bhaumik, 2009: xiv–xxiv). There have been many separatist movements in north east India with the majority of them having secessionist tones. The conflicting groups have time and again raised their demands of separation from the Indian federation, yet none of them have ever succeeded, except for some concessions made by the Indian government in terms of redrawing the territorial boundaries of the region by forming new states. One of the reasons why the secessionist voices, though set in a very strong pitch, have quite often been mellowed out could be related to the way the Indian government has handled the separatist movements: contrary to the way in which West Pakistan handled the secessionist movements in East Pakistan, the Indian government did not go for an all-out fight against the 'rebels' (Bhaumik, 2009: xiv–xxiv).

Most of the movements in India's north east have been related to migration issues: because of the huge influx of migrants both from within India and from neighbouring countries, the political and social demography of the region has changed dramatically (Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Choudhury, 2000). As the migrants started to settle down in the north east, the political equations of some areas also changed in favour of the migrants leading to wider discontentment among the local population. The problem also lies in the way the north east was formed: even though it contained wide cultural and linguistic variety, the British government clubbed together the linguistically and culturally discrete areas of the north east to form the province of Assam. No wonder, even when the Indian government reorganized the state on the basis of ethnic and linguistic differences, dissenting voices of linguistic minorities could still be heard: they demanded further segmentation (Das, 2007).

The Roots of Conflict. In 1836 the British, who believed Assamese to be a mere variant of the Bengali language, declared Bengali the official language of Assam. However, following opposition from Assamese intellectuals who emphasized the uniqueness and richness of the Assamese language, in July 1873 the Assamese language was declared as 'the ordinary language of the five valley districts of Assam – Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur' (Bhaumik, 2009: 72–73). As Bhaumik (2009: 72–73) reasons, the roots of Cachar's linguistic conflicts go back to the year 1874 when the Bengali-dominated area of Cachar was assimilated in Assam's territorial boundaries to make it Chief Commissioner's Province. This reorganization of Assam's territorial boundary increased the population percentage of Bengalis in Assam, as apart from Cachar, Bengal's Sylhet district and areas of Goalpara were also added to Assam. Post partition, on the recommendations of the Bengal Boundary Commission (Virendra, 1975) major parts of Sylhet went to Pakistan (East Pakistan) because of its Muslim population, thus effectively reducing the number of Bengali speakers in Assam: this in turn provided an impetus to the rekindled feeling of a unique linguistic identity for the Assamese population based upon a common language background – the Assamese language. But as the Assamese people tried to impose the Assamese language on the people of Assam (many of whom did not identify with the Assamese language), there were widespread protests with opposition from both the Bengali-speaking people and native tribes who had a different tongue. The protests took an ugly turn on 19 of May 1960 when 11 people defending the Bengali language died in police firing – the first martyrs for Bengali language in India were born (Bhaumik, 2009: 74–75). Soon language riots broke out between two factions – one of them supported the introduction of Assamese as the official language of Assam and the other opposed any such move. The official figure of the people killed in the riot was put to around 50 (Baruah, 1999: 105). The riots attracted huge political attention and finally a compromise initiated by then Home Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shahstri, was reached that gave the local authorities the right to alter the official language of their area by a two-thirds majority (Baruah, 1999: 105; Kakati, 2006; Sharma and Sharma, 2006).

As inferred, Cachar's linguistic conflicts seem to be rooted in the intense zealousness of the language majority in declaring the Assamese language as the official language of the state. The linguistic conflicts could have been avoided if the pro-Assamese group had taken in confidence the linguistic minorities of the state. Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the chief minister of Assam, had opined that the government should have waited in declaring Assamese as the official language of the state until it got the same demand from language minorities of the state (Baruah, 1999: 112; Deka, 1993: 26); no wonder his voice fell on deaf ears that were receptive only to violent voices.

Anti-Urdu Riots in Ranchi (Bihar) – 1967

The anti-Urdu riots happened in the state of Bihar (present day 'Jharkhand') in the year 1967; the riots were in opposition to the possible inclusion of Urdu as a second official language of Bihar alongside Hindi. A series of riots took place which involved widespread looting, arson and killing.

The language issue in Bihar was aroused by the political parties who were trying to have a hold in the state after the demise of the first chief minister of Bihar, Sri Krishna Sinha, a coveted political figure, who continued in office until his death in 1961. His death left a vacuum in the Congress Party (to which Sinha belonged) leading to a leadership struggle. While the next government did continue in office for its stipulated term of five years, it continuously had to face leadership struggles – not surprisingly, in just five years the state saw three chief ministers serving the office (Brass, 1986). As the five-year term of the heavily fractioned government was scheduled to terminate in 1967, other political parties sensed an opportunity to muscle the seat of power from the congress government which was too busy dousing internal fires (Roy, 1995).

The riots, as Brass (1974: 260–262) details, were a result of complex maneuverings of symbols of group identity (in this case 'language') by political powers to suit their end. Moreover, in the case of the Ranchi riots, the language issues were given a communal tone which further aggrieved the situation (Narayan, 1975: 204–205). As Jayprakash Narayan (1975: 204–205) – one of the most celebrated political leaders of India – reasons, the decision to promote Urdu as the second official language of Bihar was taken in haste without a detailed examination of its full implications: he was of the view that Bihar should not have any second official language, be it Urdu or any other language.

From Social Arena to Business Arena – The Focus on Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

Until now the paper has focused on five major language-based conflicts that the two linguistically diverse nations of Pakistan and India experienced. It was found that, more often than not, language issues are coloured with other issues such as power sharing and social inequality of ethnic groups. In the sections that follow, the paper will focus on the business arena. To start with, it will first find out which type of business organizations could have high levels of linguistic diversity in them.

While any business organization that is situated in a linguistically diverse society could be expected to have a linguistically diverse workforce, researchers have conceptualized multinational corporations (MNCs) as being a multilingual community (Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, 2005; Björkman and Piekkari, 2009; Luo and Shenkar, 2006), where the phenomenon of language contact shapes the day-to-day interaction among employees. As argued by Makela et al. (2007), owing to their geographical distribution across national and cultural boundaries, MNCs are supposed to contain significant variations in terms of the national-cultural and linguistic background of their employees. In a social situation, those territories which face a high inflow of continuous migration often have to confront the challenges of ethnic conflicts as the migrants get very little time for assimilation in the host community's language and culture (Deutsch, 1966: 123–52). As multinational corporations are often characterized by a high inflow of migrant labour, they can also face the challenges of such conflicting situations. Moreover, recent research focusing on multinational corporations has found the linguistically diverse environment inside the multinational corporations as a breeding ground for informal connection and disconnection among the organizational members (Makela et al., 2007; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Piekkari et al., 2005), that has the power to fuel linguistic conflicts inside the MNCs.

Linguistic Conflicts and their Reflection in Business Organizations

In a recent research article, Tange and Lauring (2009) reasoned that, owing to linguistic inadequacy (perceived inadequate competence in the official language), language-based clusters could be formed inside a MNC: these clusters could be a result of employees' fear of loss of status and values connected to the vernacular (Vaara et al., 2005), and would act as a source of power to its members. Furthermore, these clusters could also become a source of power conflicts.

As 'identity constructs and is constructed by language'(Norton, 1997), languages coming into contact with one another could also bring issues such as changes in 'social and cultural identity' in multinational corporations to the fore, thus creating conflicting situations which could heat up increasingly with the passage of time unless properly managed. To take the discussion further and to understand the issues of social and cultural identity inside business organizations, the present discussion would stand to be benefitted by some inputs from social identity theory (SIT), a theory advanced by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues in the 1970s, which has been applied to a wide variety of problems and fields and has become an important new approach to social psychology (Turner, 1988). As SIT deals with social categorization and intergroup discrimination (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), the discussion would also help us better understand the possible clustering of employees on the basis of common language background.

Group Identification and Differentiation

As Tajfel (1982) mentions, it was Sumner (1906) who used the term 'in-group' and 'out-group' for the first time together. For Sumner, while there is widespread presence of 'comradeship, peace, law and order' inside in-groups, their relation to out-groups is one of 'suspicion, hostility, plunder and subjugation' (Sumner, 1906: 496). In all the language conflicts detailed here, one can find the language-based in-group having similar relations with the out-groups; it is this interrelation between groups that gives violent shapes to the conflicts. As Tajfel (1982) argues, the reason behind this discrimination between in-group and out-group may lie in the social categorization of groups: social categorization is done through the dual process of enhancement of similarities within a group (intra-category similarities are accentuated) and enhancement of differences between groups.

As was the case with all linguistic conflicts discussed in this paper, the groups in conflict put on the backburner any difference that may have existed within the group by promoting a common linguistic identity and stressed the differences between the groups on a linguistic basis – that too when in some cases none existed. For instance, in the case of Assam, there was no common language of the Assamese people, yet within-group similarities with respect to a common Assamese language were stressed; in the case of Bihar, a division among the closely associated languages (Hindi and Urdu) was underlined, when such divisions were more imaginary than real. As is obvious, such similarities and differences were stressed to create a common group identity. As our discussion now moves to group identification and group differentiation, it would be worth noticing that group differentiation further leads to group discrimination, ultimately leading to conflicts among groups.

Group Identification

Tajfel (1982) describes group identification as consisting of two (sometimes three) internal components and an external validation of the existence of the group. He reasons that, without external validation, the group can exist only in a psychological space. The three components crucial for group identification, as identified by Tajfel (1982) are: (1) cognitive components in the sense of awareness of membership; (2) evaluative components related to value connotations; and (3) emotional components in terms of emotional investment in awareness and evaluations.

As is evident from the cases of linguistic conflicts, language-based groups fulfilled all the criteria needed for group identification: the members became aware of their membership, valued their membership by boasting of their common past, and were ready to fight for the welfare of their group. Moreover, as the linguistic-minority groups were exclusively targeted by the dominant out-group, group identification based on language was externally validated by outside agents who had consensus about the existence of the minority group. The two validities (i.e. presence of internal components and external validation) thus confirm that language differences can form exclusive groups to which their members will have proper identification.

Group Differentiation

Tajfel and Turner (1979) identify three classes of variables that should influence group differentiation in social situations: (1) internalization of group membership by individuals; (2) existence of social situations that allow intergroup comparisons between relational attributes; and (3) perception of the out-group as a relevant comparison group.

In the linguistic conflicts that have been discussed in this paper, it was found that members of linguistic groups had internalized their membership by identifying themselves with the group; the relational attributes in terms of linguistic and cultural differences were explicitly present, and there was always a particular out-group that was identified: in the case of East Pakistan, the Bengali language group identified the Urdu language group as the out-group; in the case of Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu language group identified the Tamil language group; and in case of Tamilnadu, the Tamil language group identified the Hindi language group; in the case of Assam, the Assamese language group identified the Bengali language group; and in case of Bihar, the Hindi language group identified the Urdu language group as the out-group. The common thread that runs through all of these conflicts is related to the identification of an out-group which was perceived as having power to imperil the traditional power-equations among the conflicting groups.

As Rahman (1997) puts it, identity politics has the potential to leave the world a more polarized and insecure place. In the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, the movement was rooted in a sense of self-respect, and was opposed to the adoption of a language which was considered foreign (Rahman, 1997); the regional language was thus used as an identity marker for the whole group. The point that this paper puts forward is that language can act as a symbol which has the power to give a group its own distinct identification. Moreover, this symbol can be so strong that it can give shape to conflicts that may be very violent in nature (as demonstrated in the five linguistic conflicts detailed in this paper).

The Identity Marker and the State of Flux

In the case of the East Pakistan–West Pakistan division, we found the social identity marker to be in a state of flux: before the India–Pakistan partition, the people from both East and West Pakistan emphasized 'religion' as the marker of their social identity; post partition, the identity marker in East Pakistan shifted from religion to language. This shift in identity markers would remain elusive if not for explanation given under SIT. As noted by Ashforth and Mael (1989), SIT helps one answer the question 'who am I'? But the answer to this question may lie somewhere else: identity is a matter of perception and shifts in perception can be rooted in the changing local environment. In the case of East Pakistan, the local environment (pre India–Pakistan partition) was polarized with overt stress of Muslim identity. Post partition, as the religious identity was secured, the language and culture issue cropped up: it was now a fight for a unique linguistic identity.

In the case of East Pakistan, the identity marker was the Bengali language, and the fight was for a separate nation for Bengali-speaking people; in the case of Andhra Pradesh, the identity marker was the Telugu language, and the fight was for a separate homeland to be carved out from the province of Madras. In the case of Tamilnadu, the identity marker was an admixture of anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindi feeling which finally found shape in the pro-Tamil language movement. In the case of Assam, the identity marker of Assamese language was created to draw a singular linguistic identity in a multilingual state: what started as an anti-migrant feeling found its shape in the pro-Assamese language movement. Finally, in the case of Bihar, even though Urdu was used as an identity marker, it was the politics of power that played the key role. This shows how, besides being in a state of flux, identity markers are carefully manipulated by groups to suit their ends: quiet often the desire is to secure greater power and shift the power equations in favour of one's group.

Decoding Language Conflicts – Language Issues as Power Issues

While decoding the language riots in East Pakistan–West Pakistan, it was noticed that the language issues were related to power issues: the conflict was basically a power struggle in which language was seen as a tool to enter into the domains of power. It is because of this reason that Pakistan has neither observed any secessionist demand from Punjabis nor a strong call for making Punjabi the official language of Pakistan despite the fact that Punjabis constitute a sizeable majority in the country: the Pakistan Statistical Year Book 2008 reports that 44.1% of Pakistanis speak Punjabi natively (Rahman, 2007). Speakers of the Punjabi language have dominated the business scene and the political sphere in Pakistan to a great extent and had no fear of loss of cultural identity, as was the case with the Bengali language speakers. Moreover, Punjabis have dominated the military which has traditionally controlled the domains of power in Pakistan. Even at the turn of the 21st century, the officer corps of the military is overwhelmingly dominated by Punjabi and Pakhtun nationals (Charles, 2003). With power equations tilted in their favour, Punjabis sensed no power deficit that needed to be filled by secessionist demands.

Similarly, in other cases of linguistic conflicts, it was observed that the fear of dominance from the dominant language group prodded the language movements. In the next section, the paper argues that the same issues remain in the business world as well. It is argued that the official language of the workplace is often in an asymmetrical relationship with other languages. Moreover, as the official language is considered the gatekeeper of business organizations, it affects the entry order and the pecking order of the prospective members of the business organization, thus furthering discordant feelings among employees.

The Importance of Studying Language Conflicts

While the present paper elaborated the linguistic conflicts in the social arena and tried to decode them, it has yet to account for the contribution that such a discussion would bring to our understanding of the linguistic diversity in the business world. The importance lies in what Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) identify as the break-up of the old forms of plural society where the contact between different groups (whether divided by linguistic, ethnic, or religious lines) was occasional – each lived in its own silos, supporting and getting support from others, yet maintaining their distinct identity. Intergroup support existed but intergroup mobility was restricted. In the modern bureaucratic industrial society we have become increasingly dependent on cooperation with others who may not share our cultural background – intergroup boundaries have to be constantly cut across and there is huge scope for intergroup mobility. This dependence is marked by increased interaction among the groups that differ a good deal in terms of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. But as evidenced by numerous studies exploring intergroup communication in modern industrial society in an intergroup setting involving groups having different linguistic background (Gumperz, 1982), communication tends to break down because of language-based prejudices (as evidenced in language based prejudices in job-interview situations discussed later in the present paper).

A focus on language conflicts helps us in a way that language conflicts are marked by points of divergence from where two or more groups try reasserting their unique social and ethnic identity. Moreover, as ‘social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language’ (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982: 7), a focus on language conflicts is not only coveted but also necessitated. The focus on language conflicts becomes even more important given the role language plays in what Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) call ‘new speech events’: the new speech events constitute communication interaction such as job interviews, committee negotiations, public debates – events that have become even more important in the modern bureaucratized and industrialized world. Since all these events involve complex power plays among the interlocutors expressed through language use, a mastery over the established discourse patterns of the language in which discussion takes place (which in most cases is the language with official status) can give the interlocutors an important edge. This way, a shift in the choice of language of discussion can tilt the power equations between the interlocutors. This is one of the reasons why most linguistic conflicts discussed in this paper were marked by a demand of change in the status of the conflicting languages: the parties wanted to change the power equations between the communities; it is not surprising that this change was attempted through a change in the status of languages.

Second Language Learners of Official Language – A Disadvantaged Lot

In a communication scenario, while there could be glitches due to lack of grammatical or lexical competence, by and large it is the differences in the rhetorical styles of the speakers that lead to communication difficulties. Moreover, as the rules of the rhetorical attainment are not made explicit by the dominant language speakers (due to power asymmetry between the languages) even those speakers who have good competence of grammatical rules and a powerful lexicon would fail to communicate properly; this would lead to problems in intercultural understandings and can put the non-dominant language group at disadvantages in ‘institutional settings and interactions’– that is, public debates, discussions, job interviews and formal interactions in the workplace (Eerdmans et al., 2003). What is even more important is the fact that this disadvantage would persist, as even the most capable learners would find it hard to master the discourse strategies of any non-native language as these strategies can only be learned through a process of socialization with the target language community – a process that cannot happen until one has mastered the nuances of the target language and developed a high level of ‘communicative competence’ (Canale and Swain, 1980), the development of which calls for extensive socialization with the target language community. This way the language learner is put into a paradoxical situation: to socialize with the target language group, good control over discourse strategies is needed, but to gain good control over discourse strategies, extensive socialization is needed. As one feeds into the other, the vicious circle quite often breaks the language learner who is forced to go back to her/his native language group, and thus continue with her/his the native social and linguistic identity. This reversion to native social and linguistic group can also lead to linguistic clustering in a business organization: when newcomers arrive in an organization, they are concerned with both situational-definition as well as self-definition (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). It is but natural that language would play a role in these processes as both demand extensive communication with the members of the organization. As communication with linguistically alike members would be easier, it is expected that the newcomer will soon cluster with those who share the same linguistic background.

In the next section, the paper will focus on the most important gatekeeper to business organizations – the job interview. It will be reasoned that, while the official language of a workplace puts those who have learned the official language as their native language at an advantageous position, it negatively affects all others.

Job Interviews – Undue Advantage to Some, Disadvantage to Others

Research has found that in a job interview set up, candidates often get an edge due to their linguistic skills. In the job interview setting, while 'what' is being said does matter, the 'how' is equally important, that too when the 'how' is subordinate to the communication skills of the interviewee. As evidenced by Jupp et al. (1982), speakers who have learnt the official language as their second language are at a disadvantage in job interview settings. Jupp et al. (1982) found that many South Asian speakers of English in Britain, who otherwise had excellent command over the grammatical rules and lexicon of the English language, failed to connect successfully in crucial speech events. The failure, the authors found, reinforced the negative stereotype of South Asian speakers of English language in the eyes of British, who judged the South Asians unfit for jobs requiring high communicative competence.

Apart from linguistic stereotypes playing a role in job interviews, those having vernacular language background face difficulty in terms of social and cultural resources available to them: a mismatch of interviewer's and interviewee's language background seriously undermines the communication process during the job interview because of differences in expected patterns of communication choice. As Akinnaso and Ajirotutu (1982) demonstrate, in an employment interview set up, an interviewee's ethnic style and accretion of culturally specific discourse features can lead to negative evaluation by the interviewee. In their study, Akinnaso and Ajirotutu (1982) found support for the argument that discourse conventions are crucial to employability. The study included a thorough analysis of the culturally specific discourse features and the use of culture-specific paralinguistic features (consisting of back channel cuing, vowel lengthening, rhythm, and voice quality). Their findings confirmed the notion that, in job interview settings, candidates who fall short on discourse conventions of the dominant language are at a disadvantage. Moreover, as the non-dominant language speakers are expected to have restricted access to the discourse norms of the dominant language due to restricted language socialization with the dominant language speakers (here language socialization means what Jupp et al. (1982) state: the learning of speaking practice which constructs and guides social interaction within specific social contexts), the disadvantage would linger perpetually. What is more, as discourse norms are supposed to be embedded in cultural settings, any attempt to learn the discourse norms of the dominant group by the non-dominant language speaker would demand acceptance of the cultural values and norms of the dominant group. This in turn would demand some identity transformation (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu, 1982). In all the five linguistic conflicts that were discussed in this paper, the fear of loss of identity contributed to the agitations expressed by the non-dominant group. It was found that, for socio-economic reasons, and for the fear of loss of identity, the language groups engaged themselves in violent conflict; it would not be unreasonable to assume that non-dominant language groups would attempt to fight back to maintain their distinct identity even at the workplace.

Accessing the Domains of Power – The Language Way

All the five cases of linguistic conflicts discussed in this paper were found to be rooted in the perceived loss of access to domains of power due to change in policies related to language use. As language policies restrict access to the domains of power (such as civil administration, military, and judiciary), any change in the language policies would affect the language-based groups. As languages are seen as a vehicle to get access to the domains of power, conflicting groups would try to change the language policies in their favour by according their language higher status; that is, making it the official language of the state. While language policies may or may not affect the business world directly, quite often the official language of the state is frequently used in the business world as well. Moreover, as jobs in the business world are filled through job interviews, the official language would be seen as a vehicle to get access to the powerful domain of the business world.

Lessons for the Business World

As our discussion has till now centred on the discussion of linguistic conflicts inside social and business arenas, it would be worth noticing that the discussion could have some policy implications as far as language issues inside business organizations are concerned. A detailed discussion about the policy issues would indeed be outside the purview of the paper and would demand a thorough inquiry into the business needs and the contextual issues that affect business organizations. Nonetheless, there are some general outcomes of the discussion that might help business organizations better manage the linguistic diversity of their employees.

First, taking a clue from the linguistic conflicts, business organization should be extra cautious in framing language policies related to any official language policy. The case of Assam might give an indication to the MNCs: how and when to change linguistic policies so that they cater to the genuine needs of the employees. The case of Bihar indicates that it would be better to toe the line with extra caution before any changes in the existing policies are executed. While any kind of secessionist demand in the MNCs (such as the one in the East–West Pakistan case) seems out of the question (as it would not help any conflicting group), linguistic groups could force external changes that can affect the business organizations. An example would be the French language policies for business organizations in the Quebec province of Canada (Veltman, 1996).

Second, business organizations, especially the MNCs, should be on guard: they would be better placed if they continually engaged in linguistic auditing (Reeves and Wright, 1996) in order to assess the linguistic diversity inside the organization. Third, business organizations must keep an eye out to detect if self-categorization is being done on the basis of linguistic lines: the reasons behind the categorizations must be properly decoded or else any action will only fuel further self-categorization. Fourth, employees should be given enough freedom so that they can maintain their social and linguistic identity, and finally, fifth, business organizations should strive to develop a positive tolerance for diversity (Janssens and Steyaert, 2003) – they should provide active support to maintain linguistic heterogeneity.

Summing Up

The reason behind focusing on linguistic conflicts and their possible ramifications in the business arena was to emphasize that there is an overarching need to address the issue of language conflicts inside business organizations, especially MNCs, in an exclusive way and that it would be improper to discuss these issues under the wider ambit of cultural diversity, which has usually been the case until now (Björkman and Piekkari, 2009). It was argued that language should in itself be considered worth researching. Quite often language conflicts are studied under the wider pretext of failure of communication or cultural differences (Hogg and Abrams, 1988: 164–170), which only drives away the focus from issues related to language differences. The argument put forth in this paper is not to detach language issues from their complex underpinnings, but to shift the focus: it is a trial to locate the reasons for business world conflicts in the asymmetrical power relations between different language groups.

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