

Research Article

Ideologies of Mother Tongue at an Indian University: From Stage to Discussion

Christina P. Davis * 
Western Illinois University

Chaise LaDousa 
Hamilton College

Received: January 20, 2023
Accepted: June 5, 2023
Published: September 20, 2023
doi: [10.5281/zenodo.8365025](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8365025)

The concept of mother tongue gained salience in India in the mid-nineteenth century and has been central to language and education policy, scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, and lay conceptions of language. While scholars have outlined the multiple meanings and uses of the term, we move the analysis of mother tongue from its possibilities to moments of practice. We examine how mother tongue is differently imagined within and across performances and interviews at an elite university in India, the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN). On February 21, 2020, IITGN held a Mother Tongue Day Celebration in which students and faculty gave oratorical and musical performances. In January and February 2020, LaDousa and two research assistants interviewed graduate students about their ideas of mother tongue in relation to their multilingual

practices on campus and at home. The mother tongues represented in the performances, which were meant to illustrate India's diversity, mostly corresponded to standardized varieties ratified in the Indian constitution. In contrast, the interviews revealed conceptions of mother tongue to be multidimensional and less tied to a single unifying logic. We show that while in the staged performances mother tongue was aligned with constructions of languages present in recent Indian education policies, it was ripe for complication in less concerted moments of reflection. This article contributes to interdisciplinary work on mother tongue by highlighting it as a dynamic and shifting ideological notion that is implicated in dimensions of inequality and problems of ethnic, religious, regional, and national belonging.

Keywords: higher education; India; mother tongue; multilingualism; performance

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “mother tongue,” which originated in Europe, gained salience in India in the mid-nineteenth century and has been highly pervasive ever since (Ramaswamy, 1997). It acquired institutional legitimacy in part through its use in the Indian census since 1881. However, its definition changed over time (Pattanayak, 1981). This notion has been central to national language and education policy and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. And it lays conceptions of language in relation to social life. While some scholarly works treat mother tongue as something that a person possesses as an objective feature of the world, recently scholars have analyzed it as an ideologically mediated concept that is variable, multiple, and politically and morally driven¹ (Bénéï, 2008; Davis, 2020, 2022; Hastings, 2008; Hoffmann-Dilloway, 2010;

* Christina P. Davis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Macomb, IL 61455, U.S.A., c-davis@wiu.edu

¹ Language ideologies have been defined as “conceptualizations about languages, speakers, and discursive practices,” which, like other kinds of ideologies, are “pervaded with political and moral interests, and are shaped in a cultural

LaDousa, 2010, 2014; LaDousa et al., 2022; Mills, 2004). Historical studies have shown how senses of mother tongue have varied in relation to the cultural histories of different languages and were variously imagined by different individuals and groups over time (Mitchell, 2009; Ramaswamy, 1997). Sociolinguistic studies focused on India outline the multiple meanings and uses of the term (Annamalai, 2018; Khubchandani, 2003; Pattanayak, 1981). In this article, we move the analysis of mother tongue from its possibilities to moments of practice. We incorporate participant observation and interviews at an elite technical university in West India, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN), to examine how mother tongue is variously defined and imagined within and across different contexts—i.e., cultural performances and interviews.

In conjunction with UNESCO’s International Mother Language Day, on February 21, 2020, IITGN held a Mother Tongue Day Celebration in their main auditorium. In her opening remarks, as we detail below, the master of ceremonies (MC) transformed the crowd into an embodiment of the Indian nation by giving greetings that represent mother tongues. She then invited students, faculty, and children to embody discrete mother tongues through their oratorical and musical performances. In January and February 2020, LaDousa, a white American male, and two research assistants interviewed twenty-six IITGN graduate students about their conceptions of mother tongue in relation to their experiences with language and multilingual practices on campus and at home. He was initially struck by the incongruities between the representations of mother tongue in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration and the interviews, as well as by the fact that the students whose interviews occurred after the Celebration did not refer to it. In this article, we ask: What manifestations of mother tongue did the IITGN students invoke when they reflected on its role in their lives? And was the connection to the nation embodied in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration available to the IITGN students?

In the Mother Tongue Day Celebration, mother tongues were mostly presented as standardized varieties ratified in the Indian constitution and represented by widely known genres of poetry and personally created poems. In the interviews, the students identified a much greater number of mother tongues that were not confined to standardized state languages—they included linguistic varieties associated with regional, ethnic, and religious identities. Rather than prioritizing the nation, their discussions of mother tongue emerged from their everyday experiences with language. They questioned the meanings and uses of mother tongue in relation to their own and various imagined scenarios (e.g., an orphan who doesn’t know their birth parents). While some students claimed a single mother tongue, those claims were more challenging for students who grew up in different states/regions, had families with multigenerational migration histories, had parents with mixed linguistic heritage, or were from the Hindi Belt (see below).

setting” (Irvine, 2012, para. 1). For literature on language ideologies, see Gal and Irvine (2019); Silverstein (1979); and Woolard and Schieffelin (1994).

The boundaries between different languages—kept intact in the performances and some parts of the interviews—broke down when the students discussed their speaking and text messaging practices in English, Hindi, and other Indian languages. Sometimes they described their uses of different languages (e.g., how they switch from English to a language they claimed as a mother tongue when shocked or hurt), and sometimes they mixed English and Hindi when reflecting on their communicative practices. The interviews revealed conceptions of mother tongue to be multidimensional and less tied to a single unifying logic. In this article, we show that while in the staged performances mother tongue was aligned with constructions of languages present in India’s recent education policies (see below), it was ripe for complication in the less concerted moments of reflection facilitated by the interview context. We contribute to studies of mother tongue in South Asia by highlighting it as a dynamic and shifting colonial and postcolonial concept that can never fully describe, reflect, or represent the sociolinguistic realities of modern India.

Performances and interviews are both examples of metadiscursive practices in the sense that they “report, describe, interpret, and evaluate” discursive processes (Briggs, 1986, p. 2). Though inspired by UNESCO’s International Mother Language Day (see below), IITGN’s Mother Tongue Day Celebration is an example of a cultural performance, a highly established genre in South Asia (they regularly occur in schools, colleges, and universities). In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropological work began to analyze performances not simply as artful representations that stand apart from everyday life, but as practices that are inseparable from their social and cultural contexts of production (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Performances provide a “frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes” (1990, p. 60), and can “move the use of heterogeneous stylistic resources, context-sensitive meanings, and conflicting ideologies into a reflexive arena where they can be examined critically” (p. 60). A large body of literature on performance in South Asia has looked at how performance genres voice criticism of patriarchal dominance and other forms of subordination that are often shaped by the dynamics of caste and labor (Gold, 1992; Raheja & Gold, 1994; Seizer, 2005). Works have also analyzed the complex relationship between practices and roles that occur onstage and offstage (Seizer, 2011; Weidman, 2021; see Nakassis, 2023 for a theorization of onscreen/offscreen in relation to Tamil cinema).

Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods in the social sciences. In the late 1980s, scholars started to critically examine them as forms of discourse or speech events that are informed by particular communicative norms, impacted by power dynamics, and productive of particular kinds of knowledge (Briggs, 1986; see Fuller, 2000). Interviews can be understood as co-created by the interviewer and the interviewee(s) (Mishler, 1986), and are sites where important ideological work occurs (Perrino & Pritzker, 2022; see Gal & Irvine, 2019 on ideological work). We chose interviews as our main research method because we wanted to encourage the IITGN students to talk about the concept of mother tongue in relation to their multilingual practices. As we further detail in the discussion of our methods, the conversations that

emerged from these interviews were shaped by the participants present (the interviewer and interviewee[s]), the dynamics among the participants, the questions asked, and the way the discussion sequentially unfolded (order of topics and comments), among other factors.

2. MOTHER TONGUE IN POLICY AND LITERATURE

Scholars have traced the various and sometimes incompatible definitions of mother tongue in different iterations of the census since 1881 (the first census in 1872 did not refer to mother tongue) (Pattanayak, 1981; see Khubchandani, 1983, 1997). Since 1961, the Indian census has used the following definition of mother tongue (Government of India, 2011)²:

Mother tongue is the language spoken in childhood by the person's mother to the person. If the mother died in [the child's] infancy, the language mainly spoken in the person's home in childhood will be the mother tongue. In the case of infants and deaf mutes, the language usually spoken by the mother should be recorded. (p. 3)

The census definition was based on the definition of mother tongue in Webster's Third New International Dictionary: "The language of one's mother: the language naturally acquired in infancy and childhood: one's first language" (Pattanayak, 1981, p. 28). Pattanayak (1981) discusses how the definition is "inadequate, and even misleading" in part because sometimes Indian children will grow up speaking the father's dialect (e.g., in patrilocal families or if the mother is deceased) (p. 48). In fact, the association of mother tongue with the speech of a mother has long been problematized. In the early 1960s, South Indian activist and politician, E. V. Ramasami, attacked the feminization of the mother tongue that was salient to both Indianists and Dravidianists at the time (Ramaswamy, 1997). He asked, "Having given birth to us, if our mother left us in the house of a Telugu speaker or a Muslim, would we not start to speak in Telugu or Urdu?" (Anaimuthu, 1974, as cited in Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 239). As an example of a recent critique, educator, and activist Dr. Mahender Thakur (2022) discusses how mother tongue "most likely does not refer to the language knowledge that a kid acquires from his or her mother, but rather to the language of the environment in which the child is raised" (para. 1). Several scholars have pointed to the overall failure of the census to accurately depict India's sociolinguistic situation, particularly its multilingualism (Khubchandani, 1983; Mohanty, 2019).

The concept of mother tongue has been central in India's post-independence language and education policies. When Hindi was declared India's official language in 1947,

² In the 1881 census mother tongue was defined as the "language spoken by the individual from the cradle." However, in 1891 the term mother tongue was replaced by "parent tongue," which, in 1901 was replaced by "language ordinarily used." In 1911 it became "language ordinarily spoken in the household" and in 1921 it reverted to "language ordinarily used." The term mother tongue has been used since the 1931 census (Pattanayak, 1981, 47–48). In 1951 mother tongue was defined as "the language spoken from the cradle. In the case of infants and deaf-mutes give the mother-tongue of the mother" (Government of India, 1953, p. 1).

policy makers agreed that “English would be replaced by Indian languages at the federal level and the state level” (Annamalai, 2004, p. 184), but a later act allowed for the continued use of English for official purposes (Das Gupta, 1970). After fears of disintegration had led to an initial period of reluctance on the part of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1956 India was linguistically organized into fourteen states, most with one Indian language as the official state language. These new boundaries encompassed highly salient regional affiliations of linguistic varieties, some of which crossed new state boundaries. For example, Malayalam is spoken in parts of Tamil Nadu near the Kerala border, and Bhojpuri is spoken in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. In order to facilitate national integration, the government passed the “three-language formula” in 1968. The version that was approved by Parliament and incorporated into the National Policy on Education recommended that pre-university students be taught the following languages (Aggarwal, 1988):

- 1) the mother-tongue or the regional language;
- 2) the official language of the Union or the associate official language so long as it exists; and
- 3) a modern Indian or foreign language not covered under (1) and (2) and other than that used as medium of instruction. (p. 290)

The policy was ambiguous in that it did not explain how a regional language was different from a mother tongue. Mohanty (2019) notes that because the two were not treated as distinct options, the majority languages of states were imposed on linguistic minorities (see below). Although English was not named in this version of the formula, schools throughout the nation have widely selected it as either the second or third language depending on if the school is located in a Hindi-speaking state (Annamalai, 2004).

The onset of the policy of economic liberalization in 1991 with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao’s government entering into an agreement with the International Monetary Fund brought more emphasis on English in Indian education (Annamalai, 2018). Since then, globalization and neoliberalism have only increased the demand for English (Hornberger & Vaish, 2009; Proctor, 2014). English is widely viewed as a prerequisite for access to higher education, which is almost entirely in English, and high-paying government and private-sector employment (Bhattacharya & Jiang, 2022). Currently, a significant portion of government schools and nearly all private schools teach through the English medium (Sah, 2022).

As Sah (2022) states, “The desire for EMI [English-medium instruction] is so strong that even low-fee private schools have mushroomed, which only appear to be English-medium in a formal sense but use local languages excessively” (p. 748). Annamalai (2004) discusses how the equation of English-medium education with success is misleading because most of the students who get into professional, managerial, and academic positions in India and abroad studied in well-funded English-medium schools

and came from families where English was used as a second language for at least one generation.

The concept of mother tongue is widely employed in recent education policies in India, but it is often left undefined or only partially defined. India’s Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 mandates free and compulsory education for all Indian children between the ages of six and fourteen. It was praised widely for increasing access to education for the nation’s poorest groups, many of whom are linguistic minorities (e.g., speakers of indigenous languages). Section 29(2)(f) recommends that the “medium of instruction shall, as far as practicable, be in child’s mother tongue,” but the document does not provide any explanation of mother tongue and it does not mention English (Parliament of India, 2009, p. 11; see Bhattacharya & Jiang, 2022; Sadgopal, 2010).

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, which is led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, released the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP)³, a document that proposes a revision to many aspects of the structure of the Indian education system. In this policy, the government extends the nationalist ideological position taken by several previous governments by specifying that students should learn in their mother tongue whenever possible. English is mentioned only in the context of its offering as a subject of study along with other language and the need for bilingual textbooks in certain subjects (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020). The document represents a notable departure from the National Curriculum Framework of 2005, which discussed the importance of English in Indian social life and advocated for its universal use in schools (National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2005). The 2020 NEP explains how mother tongue often corresponds to a home language and a local language but that such is not always the case in multilingual families (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020):

Home language is usually the same language as the mother tongue or that which is spoken by local communities. However, at times in multi-lingual families, there can be a home language spoken by other family members which may sometimes be different from mother tongue or local language. (p. 13)

The document later specifies the need for education until grade 5 to be in the “home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language” (Government of India, 2020, p. 13). However, it does not discuss how those terms differ (Sah, 2022).

By not defining mother tongue or situating it in relation to English, the RTE Act and the 2020 NEP gloss over crucial inequalities in education in India. Firstly, because only a small number of the languages/linguistic varieties spoken in India are offered as mediums of instruction in schools, many linguistic minorities study in an Indian language that is not their primary language, thus putting them at an educational disadvantage (Bhattacharya & Jiang, 2022). Mohanty (2019) refers to this issue in the context of discussing the educational neglect of tribal children. A large body of academic

³ A draft NEP was released in 2019 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2019).

literature on South Asia contrasts mother tongue education with English education. However, scholars often do not acknowledge that some students study in a standardized language that is not their mother tongue/primary language (Khubchandani, 2003; LaDousa & Davis, 2022). Ramanathan (2005) makes this point in observing that vernacular education does not always mean mother tongue education. Secondly, as discussed above, there is a vast and widely discussed socioeconomic disparity between the families of children educated in high quality English-medium schools and Indian-language-medium schools, which dates back to the colonial era (see Chandras, 2019; Kumar, 2005; Mohanty, 2019; Sah, 2022).

Although the concept of mother tongue is widely employed in studies of education, multilingualism, and minority languages in India, only a few scholars have traced its multiple meanings and uses (Annamalai, 2018; Khubchandani, 2001, 2003; Pattanayak, 1981; see Groff, 2017 for an overview). As Khubchandani (2003) writes, “The supporters of mother tongue ideology have not cared to define the bounds of a mother tongue, nor has adequate attention been paid to accounting for the patterns of language hierarchy prevailing in multilingual plural societies—a sort of unhomogenizable diversity” (p. 245). Annamalai (2018) complicates studies of mother tongue that treat it as unambiguous and concrete by discussing how the term is differently employed. It may be used to refer to the language of one’s mother, a language of primary socialization (a language used while growing up), and a language of communicative competence. But he notes that mother tongue can also be “the language by which people label their linguistic identity as adults,” and that “one does not have to be necessarily competent in the language for this cultural, social, or political identification” (Annamalai, 2018, p. 77). For example, there are populations of Kannada or Telugu people who have lived in Tamil Nadu for centuries. Though they speak Tamil as a primary language, they name either Kannada or Telugu as their mother tongue on the census because the language corresponds to their social identity (E. Annamalai, personal communication, October 26, 2022; see Annamalai, 1986, 1997).

But Annamalai (2018) notes that Indians do not name English as their mother tongue if they are not proficient in it. Khubchandani (2003) also captures the sense of mother tongue as a language of social identification in defining “native speech” as “the first speech acquired in infancy, through which a child gets socialized” and mother tongue as “categorized by one’s allegiance to a particular tradition, and is socially identifiable” (p. 242). And, as Mitchell (2009) discusses, when a person chooses a language as a mother tongue on the census, they are not simply claiming a language, but positioning themselves in relation to a sociolinguistic situation in a way that can reflect their political, religious, or class aspirations.

A very small number of Indians, most of whom are upper-middle class and urban, speak English as a primary/home language. However, Indians rarely claim it as a mother tongue on the census (Annamalai, 2018). In the 2011 census, only 256,000 people

named English as a mother tongue but 83 million named it as a first language⁴ and 46 million named it as a second language (Government of India, 2011). Most Indians who predominantly speak English at home also speak one or more Indian languages/linguistic varieties, one of which they may name as a mother tongue (Seetharaman, 2019). They may also avoid claiming English as a mother tongue because of its status as a foreign language introduced through colonial rule (LaDousa et al., 2022). In the discussion of the interviews, we look at the case of a highly multilingual student who refrained from declaring English to be his mother tongue even though he described it as his first language. His situation is distinct from other students because he did not claim primary proficiency in one or more Indian languages/linguistic varieties.

3. IITGN AND METHODS

The first Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) was founded in West Bengal in 1951 with the goal of producing an “adequate supply of technologists and engineers for the development of post war India” (Government of India, 1948, p. 2). IITs are autonomous public technical universities that receive a large share of the central government’s funds for higher education and have a highly competitive exam-based admissions system. They are considered to be the best in the nation for engineering. IITGN, which was founded in 2008, is located in the state of Gujarat, where Gujarati is the state language.

Lectures and coursework are almost entirely in English, but Hindi, the national language of India, functions as a common language along with English. In the classroom and on campus students speak English on its own and mix it with Hindi and other Indian languages. There is a significant linguistic divide between North Indian students, who are usually proficient in Hindi, and South Indian students, who may have studied Hindi in school, but rarely speak it proficiently. They communicate in English with classmates who speak different first languages (LaDousa et al., 2022).

IITGN students vary with respect to their region of origin, ethnicity, religion, gender, caste, class, and sociolinguistic competency. In the interviews, the students explicitly differentiated each other in terms of language and region. Some discussed their own religious affiliations in relation to languages they speak or learned in school (e.g., Urdu or Sanskrit), but they did not refer to their classmates by religion. IITGN, like all IITs, requires that 15, 7.5, and 27 percent of available seats be reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (castes), respectively, but students from upper-caste backgrounds are still overrepresented (Subramanian, 2019). Caste hierarchies are recognized on campus and inform interactions, but caste was not mentioned in the interviews, likely because of its entanglements with discourses of

⁴ Indians may have strategic reasons for claiming English as a first language on the census. For example, parents migrating to states the dominant language of which they do not speak may name English as a first language because it will allow them to opt for it when their mother tongue is not offered as a medium of instruction (Annamalai, 2018).

meritocracy and justice⁵. In addition, the students interviewed in groups were likely in the presence of classmates from different caste backgrounds (LaDousa et al., 2022).

IITGN is a particularly rich site for the study of ideologies of language in social life because, as an elite university, it combines students from diverse linguistic and regional backgrounds. The students are highly geographically mobile in the sense that many have lived in different places (in the same or different states), have families with complex migration histories, or both (E. Annamalai, personal communication, October 26, 2022). For comparative purposes, it would be fruitful to study ideologies of mother tongue at less prestigious colleges and universities or at other kinds of institutions that integrate people from different regions, such as call centers or national corporations.

LaDousa conducted participant observation at IITGN in January and February 2020, attending campus events including the Mother Tongue Day Celebration. He and two graduate students—a female doctoral student in cognitive science from Maharashtra named Praji and a male student in the Master of Arts in Society and Culture (MASC) program from Kerala named Yogesh—conducted fifteen interviews with IITGN graduate students that ranged in length from sixty to eighty-five minutes. The research was facilitated by Nishaant Choksi, a faculty member at IITGN. LaDousa, Praji, and Yogesh recruited the twenty-six students (sixteen males and ten females) based on their interest in participating in the project. The students were in the MASC program, the Master of Technology program (MTech), and the Master of Science program. We use pseudonyms in this article to protect the identities of the students.

The interviewers asked groups of one to four students questions. In the first part of the interviews, the students were asked general questions about mother tongue, such as if they have one, the words they associate with it, how to define it, and if they associate it with region. In the second part, they were asked to reflect on their mother tongue and their experiences with language. Finally, they were asked about their spoken and texting practices. LaDousa, who is highly proficient in Hindi, interviewed MASC students in English (he chatted with some students in Hindi after the interviews were complete). Praji and Yogesh interviewed MTech and Master of Science students; they translated parts of the questions into Hindi to accommodate students who were having comprehension trouble. However, they only used Hindi when all of the students present spoke it proficiently. Although Praji and Yogesh both speak several other Indian languages (e.g., Marathi and Malayalam), the use of those languages would have excluded some of the students.

Because of LaDousa's identity as a foreigner, many of the students initially assumed he knew very little, but they opened up once they realized that he has extensive knowledge

⁵ Ajantha Subramanian (2019) provides an in-depth historical account of relationships among caste hierarchies, reservation policies, and ideologies of meritocracy at IIT Madras. Her study reveals the complicated ways in which an upper-caste—especially Brahmin—identity is imbricated with the nationalist development goals of IIT in alumni reflections. She situates these reflections in a “war of maneuver” with recent lower caste political movements (2019, p. 26).

of Indian education (he referred to exams they took and knew some of their secondary schools) and has been doing research in North India for three decades. He and the students maintained a friendly rapport throughout the interviews; in some instances, the students flipped the interview by asking him about his upbringing and experience learning a second language.

In the group interviews with LaDousa, Praji, and Yogesh, the students encouraged each other to collaborate in offering definitions of mother tongue and discussions of different linguistic scenarios. The students also sometimes questioned each other on their claims about mother tongues, prompting some light debate. The interviews were transcribed and translated by Davis, a white American female, LaDousa, Choksi, and an IITGN graduate student named Manasa Poluru, and analyzed by Davis and LaDousa. Davis' language study (Tamil) and research experience in South India, West India (Mumbai), and Sri Lanka complements LaDousa's experience in North India.

4. IITGN MOTHER TONGUE DAY CELEBRATION

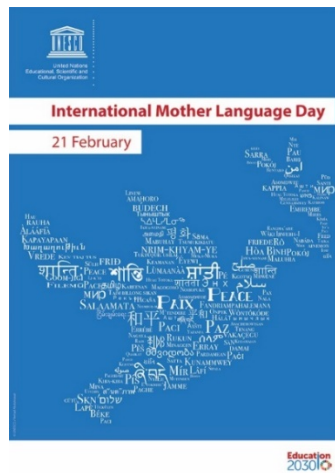
In November 1999, UNESCO proclaimed February 21 International Mother Language Day and called upon Member States and the UN Secretariate to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world (see Image 1). UNESCO's decision to make February 21 International Mother Language Day was inspired by Bangladesh's Language Movement Day, a public holiday commemorating those who lost their lives in the struggle for the Bengali language, Bangla⁶.

The phrase mother language was likely used instead of mother tongue because of the translation of the Bangla word *bhāṣā* [language]. UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France holds a special event for International Mother Language Day every year, but it is also celebrated by people all over the world. The UNESCO website states that International Mother Language Day “recognizes that languages and multilingualism can advance inclusion, and the Sustainable Development Goals focus on leaving no one behind.”⁷

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/motherlanguageday>

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day>

Image 1. UNESCO International Mother Language Day⁸



On the afternoon of February 21, 2020, hundreds of students and faculty gathered in an auditorium on the IITGN campus for the annual Mother Tongue Day Celebration. A multicolored flier had been posted around the campus for a week before the event (see Image 2). On the flier Hindi in Devanagari script named the school, *bhāratīya praudyogikī sansthān gandhīnagar*, and the event, *mātribhāṣā divas samāroha*. Their English equivalents in Roman script followed below: Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar and Mother Tongue Day Celebration. A variety of scripts filled the remaining space. Each was used to render the name of a corresponding language: Tamil, Gujarati, Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi, Kannada, Odia, Nepali, and Urdu. English in Roman script was not used to include the word English, but the date, time, and location of the event appeared only in English.

Image 2. IITGN Mother Tongue Day Celebration flier



⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day>

At the start of the ceremony, a digital image of the announcement was projected onto the auditorium screen and the MC, a female IITGN student, walked up a small staircase onto the stage and took her place behind the podium. She spoke into the microphone:

MC: *namaskār*, *namaste*, *namoskāz*, *praṇām*, *namaskārā*, *sat sirī akāl*, *namaskāram*, *vaṇakkam*, *ādāb*, *ghanī khammā*, and many more. Hopefully, my *namaste* rings rightly to you all.

The MC's first two utterances reveal much about the performativity of language in the representation of the Indian nation. First, she used multiple address terms with the audience, which served both to represent as well as to greet. By doing this, she treated the audience as an embodiment of the Indian nation. The greetings roughly correspond to Indian languages but also address ethnic, regional, and religious identities: *vaṇakkam* is Tamil; *ghanī khammā*—usually written *khammā ghanī*—is Marwari, a regional variety spoken in Rajasthan that is associated with an ethnic group; *sat sirī akāl* is Punjabi and is used by Sikhs; and *ādāb* is Urdu and points to a Muslim identity. The greetings *namaste* and *praṇām*, which are used in India and the diaspora, are associated with Hinduism and *namoskāz*, *namaskāra*, and *namaskāram* (all derived from the Sanskrit root *namaskār*) are regional variations found in languages and regions outside of where Hindi and Nepali are state or national languages. *Namoskāz* seems to be meant to invoke Bangla (*nomoskār*) given the realization of “o” in the second syllable, but the final sound “z” is unusual and likely due to the unfamiliarity of the MC with the greeting or some error in the word's spelling in her notes (she looked down at her notes when she gave this greeting). Most of the greetings represent standardized varieties that correspond to one or more Indian states. And all but one, *ghanī khammā* (Marwari), represent languages recognized in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. After giving the greetings, the MC switched to English to acknowledge that the group of greetings is only a small sample of those that exist (she said, “and many more”).

Although the languages included in the printed announcement and invoked in the greetings differ, in both cases multiple languages (without English) provided what the MC described several times in her presentation as India's “diversity.” For instance, soon after the greetings, she said, “This diversity of languages in India makes Mother Tongue Day even more special.” In the flyer and greetings, English was used to address the reader or listener, whether to convey details about the event or to acknowledge information about the plethora of greetings left unspoken. In expressing her hope that *namaste* “rings rightly,” the MC referred to the fact that India is too multilingual to greet the audience in front of her with the forms that might correspond to who they are. While English allowed the MC to speak about India's linguistic diversity without grounding herself in any one Indian language or identity, it is clear that only Indian languages, which she encapsulated with *namaste*, could represent and address the nation.

The greetings were the only time in the performances in which the audience was addressed. Over the next two hours, the MC invited a series of individuals to showcase certain languages. One professor read *musāyirā* [Urdu poetry], some recognized as traditional and some of the professor's own composition. Another student read poetry from Telegu and explained that he was from Andhra Pradesh. At the end of the Mother Tongue Day Celebration, two faculty children in costume sang a bhajan [devotional song] to Siva in Malayalam, focusing on a name for Siva used as a praising utterance, *śambhu*. Before they began, they explained in English that Malayalam is their mother tongue.

Only one performer focused on more than a single language. Speaking in English, a student from Karnataka compared a Kannada rendering of Shakespearean plays with the English but made explicit that his presentation was historical in nature. Indeed, he diverged from the logic of most of the presentations which had framed languages as single entities embodied in some literary tradition or devotional milieu. Only the MC's initial greetings and the presentation on Kannada and English were offered in English, and the MC never greeted the audience with hello, further intimating that India is made up of a collection of languages/mother tongues, each with a token of representation like a greeting or literary form ready to be performed. The Mother Tongue Day Celebration did not include any mention of popular media language practices or how language is used in the students' everyday lives. We now turn to the IITGN interviews. In the first section, we discuss students' ideologies of mother tongue (how they conceptualized the concept and related it to their own sociolinguistic situations), and in the second, we discuss how they described their multilingual practices in Indian languages and English.

5. IITGN INTERVIEWS: IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHER TONGUE

5.1 Defining and Conceptualizing Mother Tongue

When LaDousa, Praji, and Yogesh initially asked students if they have a mother tongue, most acted like it was a foregone conclusion with answers like, "Of course." While most of the students quickly named a mother tongue, the subsequent questions prompted them to think through the concept. As we show in the discussion below, the students' answers developed a number of scenarios through which they imagined the reality of mother tongue, some of which invoked conceptions of mother tongue in the census and other policy documents. Those scenarios, however, did not follow a unifying logic whereby mother tongues are presented as commensurate realities via a particular means of presentation. For example, as discussed above, in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration all but one of the greetings had corresponded to standardized languages recognized in the constitution, and later performances had represented languages through literary genres of wide circulation.

While the MC in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration utilized greetings to represent different mother tongues or languages, the interview responses show that many types of discursive interaction, not just greetings, can invoke mother tongues. Yogesh asked four MTech students if everyone has a mother tongue. Neha, a female student from Rajasthan, identified mother tongue with the speech of a mother to her child, a conception of mother tongue consistent with the current census definition. She voiced a mother speaking to her baby (she used a single Hindi word):

Whatever we speak we, initially, that word, we listen so, when we got born—at the same time we used to hear those words from our ma . . . mother and that’s why we speak them and that’s why we get the feeling of . . . [it] means when we drink water mummy, mother used to say that mum *pīlī* [drank], so we got the feeling like this is mum mum mum, the baby initially says I need mum, that is for water, so uh like whatever we listen, that we speak . . .

Most of the students defined mother tongue as a language they use to regularly communicate, a language in which they have communicative fluency, or a language of primary socialization (Annamalai, 2018). In contrast to the census definition, they also tended to associate mother tongue with both parents. LaDousa interviewed two Hindu MASC students: a female from West Bengal, Aarya, and a male from Kerala, Balaji. When they were asked if there is a relationship between their mother tongue and where they are from, they both described it as a language in which they regularly communicate, while Aarya also described it as a language of primary socialization. Aarya expressed uncertainty about how mother tongue exactly corresponds to place, even though her mother tongue, Bangla, is clearly grounded in her place of origin, West Bengal:

LaDousa: Alright and does your mother tongue have something to do with where you are from. Is there a connection?

Balaji: It’s a language we speak, right, it’s a language we communicate with.

Aarya: Yeah, I mean, it’s as, I mean it’s just very obvious it’s the language we speak and it’s the only language we have known while communicating, while growing up, so, I don’t know how could I relate it with the place exactly but, I don’t even know it’s all synonymous for me at least.

Similar to Aarya, several other students problematized associations between mother tongue and state/region. In an interview with LaDousa and two other students, Ruhani, a MTech student from Andhra Pradesh, said that the connection between mother tongue and region is complicated by migration, a point discussed in the NEP. She said that her mother tongue, Telugu, corresponds to her region because it is the language of her state, Andhra Pradesh. But she gave a scenario to explain how it is not the case for people who have settled in a different state:

Ruhani: But a lot of people happen that their mother tongue correlates with the region but a lot of time it doesn’t as well. People are from different areas, and they settle in different states. Like, if they are from some other state and they are brought up in Delhi. Their mother tongue is Hindi but their, uh, background is from Andhra, but they sometimes it happens that they don’t speak [it].

In Ruhani’s scenario, the person’s mother tongue is Hindi because it is the language in which they regularly communicate. But, as Annamalai noted (personal communication, October 26, 2022), some people may claim the language connected with their region of origin as their mother tongue even though it is not their primary language (see Abhishek below).

Many of the students said that everyone has a mother tongue, but others questioned the idea. Balaji and Aarya (see above) debated the topic in their interview with LaDousa. Balaji stated, “Um, probably, most probably, most of living human beings possess a mother tongue, they do have a mother tongue, I believe.” Aarya corrected him by stating that because it is “very directly related to a specific identity which is sort of ascribed,” some people may not have one, such as in the case of orphans whose birth parents are unknown (she relates mother tongue to both parents). Balaji, however, responded that a mother tongue can be achieved because an orphan will claim the language they grow up speaking as their mother tongue.

None of the students interviewed questioned the relevance or salience of mother tongue, but, as this discussion has shown, they struggled to define it in a way that works for every possible scenario (their own and others). The students had particular difficulty articulating its connection to a place or region. The nuances and complexities of the students’ reflections on mother tongue were even more apparent when they detailed their own sociolinguistic situations.

5.2 Mother Tongue in Students’ Lives

The students who spoke the language of their home state as a primary language were able to make relatively straightforward claims to a mother tongue (see Ruhani’s comment above). But such claims proved more difficult for students who had grown up in different states/regions, had families with multigenerational migration histories, or had parents with mixed linguistic heritage. In addition, students from the Hindi Belt had especially complex claims to mother tongue because many grew up speaking different regional varieties (e.g., Mewari, Marwari, Rajasthani, and Bhojpuri) in addition to more standardized Hindi. In the north, there has long been debate regarding whether regional varieties spoken there should be considered dialects of Hindi or languages in their own right (LaDousa, 2014). As we discuss below, one of the students interviewed named a mother tongue but complicated it, a second avoided the question, a third claimed multiple mother tongues, and a fourth declared himself not to have a mother tongue even though he named English as his primary and first language.

While participating in an interview with Yogesh and a female MTEch student from Tamil Nadu, Abhishek, a male MTEch student, named Malayalam as his mother tongue. However, he proceeded to discuss how he is considered to speak Malayalam poorly because he grew up in Gujarat and to speak Gujarati poorly because he is originally from

Kerala. His discussion complicates any easy correspondence between mother tongue, region, and communicative fluency:

Abhishek: When I was in Kerala for my UG [undergrad], the ability to not speak as well as the natives it's almost very automatically you are assigned that "oh you are an outsider." So that's why you don't speak as well. I wouldn't say it's a tension sort of a situation, but it becomes easily palpable for them. Even when I was here, I wouldn't speak Gujarati as good as the native, and then it is easily identified that, that might be because you are a native from Kerala. So they assume you might be speaking Malayalam better than Gujarati and when you are in Kerala, they assume you speak Gujarati better than Malayalam. So assumption from the native side I felt it, but even though I would say I speak both languages equally bad. That sort of difference is there. But that comes up and even at home I remember my dad asked me what language do I think in. "What were the words that come up in my mind?" I said I think in English or Hindi. I remember he was a bit surprised, he expected Malayalam, but I said no how can I think in Malayalam when I don't even know how to read and write in Malayalam.

In the above discussion, Abhishek reported his father's surprise that the language in which Abhishek thinks does not correspond to his mother tongue, Malayalam. As the recounted interaction illustrates, he is doubly excluded by the notion of mother tongue because he grew up outside his region of origin and has gained primary proficiency in English and Hindi, languages other than that associated with his region.

Praji, the female doctoral student from Maharashtra who was a research assistant on the project, told LaDousa in their one-on-one interview that everyone has a mother tongue. But when LaDousa directly asked her to name her mother tongue, she described how she had grown up speaking both Marathi and Hindi:

LaDousa: So what would you say your mother tongue is?

Praji: So I grew up with two languages. But I've always spoken Marathi and I've grown up with Marathi and Hindi because my father always spoke Hindi. Like my father and grandmother mostly, like the majority of the time spoke in Hindi with each other. They also spoke with me in Hindi, but I always responded in Marathi.

Praji went on to explain that she spent her childhood in southern Maharashtra, but her family has a complex multigenerational migration history. Her father's primary language is Hindi because he mainly grew up in Madhya Pradesh. Her paternal grandfather was Maharashtrian, but he lived all over India because he worked for the post office, and her paternal grandmother had a parent from Madhya Pradesh and a parent from Andhra Pradesh. At one point she referred to the regional variety of Hindi she grew up speaking (possibly with her father and paternal grandmother) as "my slang," but she did not describe it as a mother tongue. Thus, while Abhishek (see above) chose to name a mother tongue even though his relationship to his own is fraught, Praji refrained from applying the term to her situation in her interview with LaDousa, the interviews with IITGN students she conducted, and in other interactions with LaDousa. Although we cannot know her intentions, naming a single mother tongue—or even two mother tongues—may have restricted her ability to capture the nuances of her

sociolinguistic background (i.e., she grew up speaking Marathi, standardized Hindi, and a variety of Hindi).

Some of the students from the Hindi Belt named a regional variety as a mother tongue while others named Hindi, usually because they claimed it as their language of regular communication (some students' situations were complicated by having parents who spoke different regional varieties) (see LaDousa et al., 2022). One student from the Hindi Belt, however, was the only one to explicitly claim multiple languages as mother tongues. Yogesh interviewed Anup, a male from Badhoi in Uttar Pradesh, along with two other MTEch students from similar regions. When they were asked to name their mother tongue, Anup replied that he speaks a combination of three languages, Bhojpuri, Braj, and Awadhi. It was clear from his answer to Yogesh's follow up question below that he considers all three to be mother tongues:

Yogesh: First we will start with individual questions. Do you have a mother tongue?
āpkī matribhāṣā hai?

Anup: Bhojpuri, Braj, and Awadhi, there are a combination of three languages.

Yogesh: So you think all three of them to be your mother tongue?

Anup: Yeah, so we basically use these three languages, meaning there is a particular word in each, so we are living in such a place where our district is separated. So I am living in them so that is like a cocktail for three languages.

Later in the interview, Anup noted that he was proud of the fact that he speaks the languages he does because of their relationship to the Ramayana, a Sanskrit epic composed in India over a period of nearly a millennium. He said that Ram, a Hindu deity, was from Ayodhya, so would have spoken Awadhi, and Krishna, another deity, was from Vrindavan, so would have spoken Braj. Rather than associating a region with a single mother tongue, Anup associated his region with multiple languages, which he, in turn, validated through his discussion of the Ramayana. Anup thus drew on the sacred geography of places in North India and utilized their associations with language varieties to explain his sociolinguistic situation.

A South Indian Master of Science student named Vikram was the only student interviewed to explicitly claim not to have a mother tongue. LaDousa asked Vikram in a one-on-one interview if he has a mother tongue. He replied, "That's an interesting idea because I personally don't." He explained that he grew up in Delhi with "polyglot" parents. His father had migrated to Delhi from Kerala. His mother, whose father had migrated from Tamil Nadu, had grown up in Delhi. He seemed to attribute his lack of a mother tongue to his multilingualism:

Vikram: For me to, when people ask "what language do you think in?" I'm like. . . It's a difficult question to answer because I think in English, I think in Hindi, and sometimes I do think in Tamil.

He went on to discuss that although he grew up speaking many languages, English was his “primary language at home.” He also discussed how people assume that he speaks English as a second language when it is actually his first:

Vikram: [My father] spoke English, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, and um Hindi. . . And so I grew up with that. And so when people ask me, “Oh, is English your second language?” [I say] “Do you know? I grew up speaking English.”

In the above excerpts, Vikram implied that his extreme multilingualism excludes him from having a mother tongue (i.e., he thinks in multiple languages rather than a single language). And while he spoke about being multilingual as a positive attribute, he showed some insecurity about his lack of proficiency in Tamil. He mentioned that when he visits his relatives in Tamil Nadu they complain to his mother that he speaks English and Hindi instead of Tamil. The fact that Vikram speaks many Indian languages but does not have primary proficiency in one is directly related to his parents’ mixed linguistic heritage (they do not share a first/primary language) and his family’s multigenerational migration history. He is clearly highly proficient in English and identifies with it closely, but he refrained from explaining why English cannot be his mother tongue (LaDousa et al., 2022).

The students’ reflections show that the concept of mother tongue could not adequately account for their variegated linguistic experiences. They demonstrated that the dominant narrative that one should have communicative fluency in a mother tongue and that it should be directly related to a region of origin is rather vague to some (e.g., Aarya and Ruhani) and oppressive to others (e.g., Abhishek and Vikram). Vikram’s reluctance to name English as his mother tongue despite the fact that it was his primary home language speaks to the ideological incompatibility of English with the notion of mother tongue, something that was also apparent in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration (i.e., hello was not one of the greetings used, as mentioned above). In contrast to other mother tongues, English cannot ground a person in a region or the nation (see LaDousa et al., 2022). One student’s interview stood out from the rest in that she used mother tongue to reflect on her life experiences and sense of individuality.

5.3 My Mother Tongue

LaDousa interviewed Aaisha, a Muslim female from Kerala, with two other MASC students: a Muslim female from West Bengal and a Hindu female from Jharkhand. Aaisha initially said, “my mother tongue is Malayalam,” but when the West Bengali student noted that she associates her mother tongue, Bangla, with “identity and comfort,” Aaisha responded that she felt uncomfortable speaking her Muslim variety of Malayalam, which she called “my slang,” because it reveals her Muslim identity:

Aaisha: When I think about my mother tongue I feel like I am not comfortable even though I am speaking Malayalam because my Malayalam is revealing my identity, in Kerala. Because when I am speaking Malayalam, all these people say, “Oh is this Malayalam?” because my Malayalam, my slang, is revealing my identity because I am a Muslim. Every word in Kerala. Every word in Kerala. My Malayalam is entirely different than them.

When Aaisha initially stated that her mother tongue was Malayalam, she was referring to Malayalam as a standardized state/regional language. But when she said “my Malayalam, my slang” in the above excerpt, she was referring to the religiously marked variety of the language spoken by her family members and her Muslim community. Muslim varieties of Malayalam are inflected with Arabic words and are characterized by other distinct lexical and grammatical features (Mohammed, 2007).

Aaisha proceeded to discuss how Muslim varieties of Malayalam are mocked on a radio show in Kerala. She added that she feels uncomfortable speaking Malayalam in front of her friends (non-Muslim Malayalis): “Even when I’m in college and all I feel sad or I feel scared when I am speaking Malayalam in front my friends or to an audience because they always laugh.” She noted that her Malayalam, which is her mother tongue, is not exactly the Muslim Malayalam spoken by her family members, but her unique way of speaking that includes some English and some standard Malayalam words she picked up from friends:

Aaisha: But even my Malayalam is different from my sister’s Malayalam, my mother’s Malayalam, and my father’s Malayalam. My mother tongue is my mother tongue. I got some English words, some standard Malayalam words from my friends and all. That has made my mother tongue.

In the interview, Aaisha interrupted the association of mother tongue with comfort by pointing out that it is a source of prejudice for her because she speaks a religiously marked variety of it. But rather than critiquing the concept of mother tongue, she used it in a self-affirming way. She observed that her mother tongue is not just a named language or a religiously marked variety of it, but her own way of speaking that is a product of her life experiences (her secondary and university education and friendships) and distinguishes her from her relatives, who she described in the interview as relatively uneducated. Her Malayalam is not just a reflection of her life experiences but also her journey of upward social mobility.

Aaisha’s interview is notable because she chose to take up an exceptional/singular position when one might expect her to claim a shared identity like “Muslim.” While the other students we interviewed described their mother tongue as a single language or a mix of several languages (see Anup above), Aaisha was the only student to directly associate her mother tongue with her own unique pattern of speaking (i.e., her mixing of a religiously marked variety of Malayalam with standard Malayalam and English words). Praji had discussed how her father used to speak to her in Hindi and she would answer in Marathi, but she, in contrast to Aaisha, did not ground her experiences in the concept of mother tongue. When the students were asked about their speaking and

texting practices, the boundaries between languages/linguistic varieties were revealed to be more fluid. In addition, while the interviews showed that English could not be a mother tongue, it emerged as central in their discussions of their communicative practices.

6. IITGN INTERVIEWS: MULTILINGUAL PRACTICES

In the interviews, the students frequently mentioned English in the context of their need to improve their written and oral proficiency in it, which they equated with success at IITGN. When they described their linguistic practices on campus, however, the role of English as a common or mediating language came to the forefront. For instance, in a one-on-one interview with LaDousa, a female MASC student from Kerala named Maadhira said that she mainly speaks English with her hostel friends. As mentioned above, South Indian students often use English as a common language because most are not proficient in Hindi. When LaDousa asked if people mostly speak English at the hostel, Maadhira described the communicative practices as multilingual:

LaDousa: In the hostel people mostly speak in English?

Maadhira: So, I mean, not everybody. There's a lot of variation. There's English and there's Hindi and then there's the regional languages that sometimes I don't catch.

She, however, did not discuss how Indian languages are mixed with English.

The students referred to the mediating role of the English language and script in discussions of texting. When asked what languages and scripts they text in, some students mentioned that they text in an Indian language but use English (Roman) letters. Bhargavi, the MTech student from Tamil Nadu (see above), stated, “While texting I use the English script when talking in Tamil, and rarely English also if someone doesn't know Tamil.” Others said that they have begun texting in the scripts of the particular languages since the apps have gotten better (see Neyazi, 2019 on how smart phones have been made compatible for Indian languages).

The students provided some reflection on the uses of English in relation to Indian languages (some referred to the Indian languages as mother tongues while others did not use the term). For example, Balaji, the male MASC student from Kerala (see above), remarked to LaDousa and Arya that it is important to be sensitive to linguistic and communicative norms when speaking different languages. To illustrate his point, he said he would get slapped in the face if he said “fuck” when texting in Malayalam, his identified mother tongue, but it is okay to use the English word in certain contexts. His point speaks to the idea that appropriate language use involves more than simply translating words and phrases from one language into another.

Several students discussed situations in which they use their mother tongue vs. English and other languages. These students said that their mother tongue comes naturally; they

use it without thinking. Other students made more specific points that they use it when they are shocked, hurt, or in danger. Balaji told LaDousa, “If someone suddenly hit me from backside I will call *ayō* [a Malayali exclamatory expression].” Here, he typified his pattern by describing his linguistic practices in a particular situation. In an interview with Yogesh, a female MTech student from Kerala named Sandhya described how she uses her mother tongue when in danger:

Sandhya: If we are in danger, we say some phrase or something. Like that will be more our mother tongue. Without even thinking, that word that comes out of your mind will be your mother tongue, even if you know more than one language.

The students’ descriptions of their linguistic patterns reveal how profoundly multilingual they are in that they often translate from more than one language to come up with an English utterance. Praji interviewed four MTech students, one from Haryana and three from Rajasthan. All of the students discussed at the beginning of the interview that their usual language is a mix of Hindi and different regional varieties. The student from Haryana, Pawan, mentioned in Hindi that when he speaks in English, he first formulates the sentence in his mother tongue (Haryanvi), then Hindi, and then English. He called this practice a “double translation.” Following this, one of the Rajasthani students, Darshan, explained in a Hindi sentence with lots of English words that when he first started learning English his mother tongue (Marwari) or Hindi would come out when he tried to speak English:

Darshan: Initially jab maĩ English start matlab sikhne kī kośīś kar rahā thā because maĩ hindī medium mẽ . . . Matlab jaise English boltā thā to kabhī mother tongue nikal jāti thī kabhī Hindi nikal jāti thī.

[Initially when I started trying to learn English since I am from Hindi Medium, meaning whenever I was speaking English then sometimes my mother tongue would leave my mouth, other times it would be Hindi.]

While English was rarely mentioned in students’ attempts to define mother tongue or describe their own mother tongue(s), when they commented on their multilingual spoken and written practices, they conveyed an awareness of how they use and navigate English in relation to Indian languages. They tended to illustrate their language use by describing real life scenarios (e.g., declaring *ayō* when hit or “double translating” when trying to write in English) rather than describing their larger patterns of codemixing and codeswitching. In summary, the interviews demonstrate the remarkable variability in how IITGN students characterized and related to the concept of mother tongue in the context of their everyday lives. Aaisha’s discussion of her mother tongue as her own in the previous section illustrates the lack of fit between mother tongue and religious, ethnic, and regional distinctions. Anup’s description of his mother tongue as a cocktail of three languages (Bhojpuri, Braj, and Awadhi) shows that mother tongue does not present a singular emblem of belonging for some students.

7. CONCLUSION

There are several possible reasons why the IITGN students did not refer to the Mother Tongue Day Celebration in the interviews. We do not argue that the students imagined the performance venue in itself to be something detached from or irrelevant to their lives. Rather, we draw out how framings of languages as mother tongues emerged differently in the Mother Tongue Day Celebration and the interviews. In the interviews, the students did not foreground the nation, they did not seem to need to grapple with languages' contribution to diversity, and they engaged with forms of language emergent from the flow of their lives (e.g., exclamatory expressions). This all had the consequence that students did not feel the need to tie mother tongue to a single logic by aligning or calibrating languages via parallel uses, like greeting someone or reciting a poem to an audience. Rather, they began their consideration of whether they have a mother tongue at points radically different from others. And even students who could easily ground their mother tongue in a state and a region (e.g., Aarya and Ruhani) were reluctant to generalize about it because they knew that it was not the same for everyone.

The students' responses speak to the uneven ways in which the very question of whether someone has a mother tongue implicates people who come from different areas of India and different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. And their answers reveal that this unevenness cannot be captured by a concerted set of differences. While migration provides a major theme in the students' explanations, it ultimately does not explain the ways in which some students are implicated in regional complexities such that different varieties might be claimed as mother tongues, as in the case of students from the Hindi Belt. And regional complexities cannot address the position of someone like Aaisha who draws on aspects of her identity related to religion, education, and class to argue that, inevitably, her mother tongue is her own. Neither can they address the ways in which Vikram wrestles with the question of mother tongue given his pervasive multilingualism and the importance of English in his life. He stands out from his classmates because his home language and his language of primary proficiency (English) is not available as a mother tongue. While English was the primary language used in the interviews, it only became prominent when the students discussed their need to improve their proficiency in it or described their communicative practices. Their demonstrations of their codeswitching and codemixing practices illustrated some of the complex dynamics between English and Indian languages.

In addition to examining how performances provide insight into the social and cultural contexts from which they draw (Bauman & Briggs, 1990), it is also important to critically examine how aspects of the world presented in performances compare to people's metadiscursive reflections on their lives. Scrutiny of the concept of mother tongue is particularly urgent in India because language and education policy has relied on the idea of mother tongue as if it is so obvious and salient that it needs little definition or qualification. Indeed, conceptions of mother tongue in the 2020 NEP and the Mother Tongue Day Celebration appear to be aligned because both invite Indians to name a



mother tongue as a badge of identification and join the nation. Our interviews reveal that the IITGN students were ready to engage with the idea of mother tongue, but they did not generally take up mother tongue as effortlessly as both policy and cultural performance contexts would suggest. In fact, many students struggled to identify with a mother tongue and to use that concept to link themselves to a larger entity like a state or region. Scholarship on multilingualism in India and elsewhere in South Asia would benefit from more attention to how mother tongue—a multifaceted and shifting ideological concept—is differently employed in policy and across different contexts of practice, and how it is implicated in sociolinguistic inequalities and problems of ethnic, religious, regional, and national belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Nishaant Choksi, without whom this research would not have been possible. We are also indebted to Praji, Yogesh, Manasa Poluru, and all of the IITGN students we interviewed. Early drafts of this research were presented at the 2022 Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference and the 2022 Annual Conference on South Asia. Sasikumar Balasundaram, Daniel Bass, Kathryn Hardy, Mark Liechty, Maria Ritzema, and Mark Whitaker gave us important feedback. We would also like to give special thanks to E. Annamalai for sharing his insights into the concept of mother tongue in India.

THE AUTHORS

Christina P. Davis is a Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Western Illinois University. Her research interests concern language and media practices, multilingual policy, and ethnic conflict, in Sri Lanka and India.

Chaise LaDousa is the Christian A. Johnson Excellence in Teaching Professor of Anthropology at Hamilton College. His research interests include language and culture, political economy, and education, in India and the U.S.A.

REFERENCES

- Aggarwal, K. S. (1988). English and India's three-language formula: an empirical perspective. *World Englishes*, 7(3), 289–298. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.1988.tb00238.x>
- Annamalai, E. (1986). The sociolinguistic scene in India. *Sociolinguistics*, 16(1), 2–8.

- Annamalai, E. (1997). Development of sociolinguistics in India. In C. B. Paulson & G. R. Tucker (Eds.), *The early days of sociolinguistics: Memories and reflection* (pp. 35–41). SIL International.
- Annamalai, E. (2004). Medium of power: The question of English in education in India. In J. W. Tollefson & A. Tsui (Eds.), *Medium of instruction policies: Which agenda? Whose agenda?* (pp. 177–94). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Annamalai, E. (2018). English as first language. In G. N. Devy and T. Vijay Kumar (Eds.), *English and other international languages, people's linguistic survey of India* (Vol. 37, pp. 77–82). Orient BlackSwan.
- Bauman, R. & Briggs, C. L. (1990). Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19(1), 59–88.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.19.100190.000423>
- Bénéï, V. (2008). *Schooling passion: Nation, history, and language in contemporary Western India*. Stanford University Press.
- Bhattacharya, U., & Jiang, L. (2022). The right to education act: Medium and discitizenship. In C. LaDousa and C. P. Davis (Eds.), *Language, education, and identity: Medium in South Asia* (pp. 209–227). Routledge.
- Briggs, C. L. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chandras, J. (2019). Mother tongue activism and language shift in multilingual India: Marathi in Pune, Maharashtra. *Critical Asian Studies*, 51(4), 579–596.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1669202>
- Das Gupta, J. (1970). *Language conflict and national development: Group politics and national language policy in India*. University of California Press.
- Davis, C. P. (2020). *The struggle for a multilingual future: Youth and education in Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press.
- Davis, C. P. (2022). Muslims in Sri Lankan language politics: A study of Tamil- and English-medium education. In C. LaDousa & C. P. Davis (Eds.), *Language, education, and identity: Medium in South Asia* (pp. 113–137). Routledge.
- Fuller, J. (2000). Changing perspectives on data: Interviews as situated speech. *American Speech*, 75(4), 388–390. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-75-4-388>
- Gal, S., & Irvine, J. T. (2019). *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gold, A. G. (1992). *A carnival of parting: The tales of King Bharthari and King Gopi Chand as sung and told by Madhura Natisar Nath of Ghatiyali, Rajasthan*. University of California Press.
- Government of India. (1948). *N.R. Sarkar committee interim report*. New Delhi.
<https://www.iitsystem.ac.in/sites/default/files/reviewreports/N.R.Sarkar.pdf>

- Government of India. (1953). *Census of India, paper No. 6*.
http://lsi.gov.in:8081/jspui/bitstream/123456789/775/1/23902_1951_LA.pdf
- Government of India. (2011). *Census of India, 2011*.
file:///C:/Users/cpdav/Downloads/C-16_25062018.pdf
- Groff, C. (2017). *The ecology of language in multilingual India: Voices of women and educators in the Himalayan Foothills*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hastings, A. (2008). Licked by the mother tongue: Imagining everyday Sanskrit at home and in the world. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 18(1), 24–45.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2008.00002.x>
- Hoffmann-Dilloway, E. (2010). Many names for mother: The ethno-linguistic politics of deafness in Nepal. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 33(3), 421–441.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2010.520652>
- Hornberger, N., & Vaish, V. (2009). Multilingual language policy and school linguistic practice: Globalization and English-language teaching in India, Singapore and South Africa. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 39(3), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920802469663>
- Irvine, J. T. (2012). Language ideology. In J. L. Jackson (Ed.), *Oxford bibliographies: Anthropology*. Oxford University Press.
- Khubchandani, L. M. (1997). *Revisualizing boundaries: A plurilingual ethos*. Sage.
- Khubchandani, L. M. (2001). Language demography and language in education. In C. J. Daswani (Ed.), *Language education in multilingual India* (pp. 3–46). UNESCO.
- Khubchandani, L. M. (2003). Defining mother tongue education in plurilingual contexts. *Language Policy*, 2(3), 239–254.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1027372700861>
- Khubchandani, L. M. (1983). *Plural languages, plural cultures: Communication, identity, and sociopolitical change in contemporary India*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kumar, K. (2005). Quality of education at the beginning of the 21st century: Lessons from India. *Indian Educational Review*, 40(1), 3–28.
- LaDousa, C. (2010). On mother and other tongues: Sociolinguistics, schools, and language ideology in northern India. *Language Sciences*, 32(6), 602–614.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2010.08.001>
- LaDousa, C. (2014). *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky: Education, language, and social class in contemporary India*. Berghahn Books.
- LaDousa, C., & Davis, C. P. (2022). South Asian language practices: Mother tongue, medium, and media. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 51(1), 289–305.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041420-110048>
- LaDousa, C., Davis, C. P., & Choksi, N. (2022). Postcolonial language ideologies: Indian

- students reflect on mother tongue and English. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 32(3), 607–628. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12378>
- Mills, J. (2004). Mothers and mother tongue: Perspectives on self-construction by mothers of Pakistani heritage. In A. Pavlenko and A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 161–191). Multilingual Matters.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. (2019). *Draft national education policy 2019*. <https://www.prindia.org/reportsummaries/draft-national-education-policy-2019>.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. (2020). *National education policy 2020*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_o.pdf
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Harvard University Press.
- Mitchell, L. (2009). *Language, emotion, and politics in South India: The making of a mother tongue*. Indiana University Press.
- Mohammed, U. (2007). *Educational empowerment of Kerala Muslims: A socio-historical perspective*. Other Books.
- Mohanty, A. K. (2019). *The multilingual reality: Living with languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Mohanty, M. (2022, February 21). International Mother Language Day: Will India be able to become a global superpower without its mother languages? *Financial Express*. <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/international-mother-language-day-will-india-be-able-to-become-a-global-superpower-without-its-mother-languages/2439990/>
- Nakassis, C. V. (2023). *Onscreen/offscreen*. University of Toronto Press.
- National Council for Educational Research and Training. (2005). *National curriculum framework 2005*. <https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nc-framework/nf2005-english.pdf>
- Neyazi, T. A. (2019). Internet vernacularization, mobilization and journalism. In S. Rao (Ed.), *Indian journalism in a new era: Changes, challenges, and perspectives* (pp. 95–114). Oxford University Press.
- Parliament of India. (2009). *The right of children to free and compulsory education act, 2009*. <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/The%20Right%20of%20Children%20to%20Free%20and%20Compulsory%20Education%20Act,%202009.pdf>
- Pattanayak, D. P. (1981). *Multilingualism and mother-tongue education*. Oxford University Press.

- Perrino, S. M., & Pritzker, S. E. (2022). *Research methods in linguistic anthropology*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Proctor, L. M. (2014). English and globalization in India: The fractal nature of discourse. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 24(3), 294–314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12056>
- Raheja, G. G., & Gold, A. G. (1994). *Listen to the heron's words: Reimagining gender and kinship in North India*. University of California Press.
- Ramanathan, V. (2005). *The English-vernacular divide: Postcolonial language politics and practice*. Multilingual Matters.
- Ramaswamy, S. (1997). *Passions of the tongue: Language devotion in Tamil Nadu, 1891–1970*. University of California Press.
- Sadgopal, A. (2010). Right to education vs. Right to Education Act. *Social Scientist*, 38(9-12), 17–50.
- Sah, P. K. (2022). English medium instruction in South Asia's multilingual schools: Unpacking the dynamics of ideological orientation, policy/practices, and democratic questions. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(2), 742–755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1718591>
- Seetharaman, G. (2019, May 5). Why does the census of India focus on mother tongues? How does it make linguistic minorities invisible? *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/why-does-the-census-of-india-focus-on-mothertongues-how-does-it-make-linguistic-minorities-invisible/articleshow/69178250.cms>
- Seizer, S. (2005). *Stigmas of the Tamil stage: An ethnography of special drama artists in South India*. Duke University Press.
- Seizer, S. (2011). On the uses of obscenity in live stand-up comedy. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 84(1), 209–234. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/anq.2011.0001>
- Silverstein, M. (1979). Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. R. Clyne, W. F. Hanks and C. L. Hofbauer (Eds.), *The elements: A parassession on linguistic units and levels* (pp. 193–247). Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Subramanian, A. (2019). *The caste of merit: Engineering education in India*. Harvard University Press.
- Weidman, A. (2021). *Brought to life by the voice: Playback singing and cultural politics in South India*. University of California Press.
- Woolard, K. A., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1994). Language ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23(1), 55–82. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.23.100194.000415>