MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

FIELD NOTES

Eating my words

Linguistic politics in India

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Abstract

Language learning is common preparation for much anthropological fieldwork, but the choices researchers make in this area are distinctly political. Prompted by a chance encounter while studying Hindi, the author reflects on this realisation in view of the numerous languages spoken in India, the interactions involved in hospital-based research, and the place of language in Indian politics more broadly.

Keywords

Fieldwork, India, Languages, Ethnography

The lamps hanging from the ceiling were dim, covered by red and orange paper shades with dragons snaking up their sides that all but swallowed the light emitting from the bulbs within. I had been coming to this café for several weeks now, as the internet was the best I had found.

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Yet the papers that I had spread across the table beside my Thukpa (a Tibetan noodle soup) were almost unreadable by the weak illumination.

It was to my surprise then that I received a tap on the shoulder followed by a muted question: 'I am sorry, sir, but are you learning Hindi?'

I turned around. A group of six young men were sat at the table behind me. They had, despite the low light and my terrible handwriting, recognised the scrawls etched across my exercise books as Devanagari, the script in which the Hindi [हिंदी] language is written.

'I am,' I replied, mentioning that, in this small city nestled in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, there was a language school.

The revelation that I was indeed studying the language elicited a mixed response. 'But why?' one asked.

Even after I had explained that I was learning it to conduct research in Northern India (I even offered a brief outline of my work—a short passage that, through repetition to taxi drivers, interested guesthouse owners, and others, I had learned almost by heart) the question was repeated: 'But why Hindi?'

Back in London, during my weeks of evening classes, I had not given this question much thought. I believed the answer to be fairly self-evident: I was shortly to start fieldwork in a hospital in order to study the use of morphine (India being the largest exporter of licit opium, yet also one of the lowest users of medical opiates). Investigating this paradox and concomitant questions—how morphine is constructed as an object, how it is regulated and consumed—could mostly be done in English; the principle participants (doctors, pharmaceutical representatives, government regulators, etc.) are well versed in the language. But to really understand the problem, I wanted to include—even informally—the perspectives of those to whom English was unfamiliar.

I knew that in different regions of India different languages were spoken, and that due to the flows of internal migration, languages from all over the country could be heard in any given city. But I was learning Hindi because it was the language commonly spoken in Himachal Pradesh, the region in which I was going to work. My choice had felt purely instrumental.

'We come from Bihar,' said the self-appointed leader of the group sat behind me. 'You probably won't be able to understand us very easily—Bihari Hindi is thought to be beneath the pure Hindi they speak in the *cow-states*.' I had to look up this term later that night, but it commonly refers to the Northern Indian states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh

and, although my dinner companions that evening might have disputed it, Bihar. These are states in which the Hindi language and Hinduism—and so the sacredness of the cow—predominate.

Irrespective of the exact boundaries of that pejorative colloquialism, the point those young men were making was clear. There are of course instrumental considerations, but our linguistic choices move us in distinct ways through a much wider social and political landscape. The decisions we make in this regard have distinct political ramifications. Bihar is a state in which compulsory education and the majority of government work is carried out in Hindi. But there has been a continued struggle for the official recognition of minority languages; Maithili [मैथिली] is currently the only one officially recognised, despite having fewer speakers than another Bihari language, Bhojpuri [भोजपुरी]. It was to the leader of this hierarchy of languages, in which those at the bottom of the ladder fight for survival, that, I suddenly realised, I had indicated my allegiance.

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Controversy around language in India is nothing new—one obvious early example is the cleavage of Hindustani into Hindi and Urdu [اردو]. While mutually intelligible (differing primarily by script: Hindi using Devanagari and Urdu a modified Perso-Arabic script), the official status of these languages has been the subject of political struggle from the mid-19th century, and they have played prominent roles in both Hindu and Muslim nationalist movements since.

The contemporary political climate in India gives these discussions even greater urgency. The current prime minister, Narendra Modi, enjoys extensive support based on Hindu-nationalist policies such as the revoking of the special status enjoyed by Kashmir (India's only Muslim-dominant state) as of August 2019. In mid-September, Home Minister Amit Shah tweeted, 'If one language can unite the country today, it is the widely spoken Hindi language.' This prompted widespread anger, particularly from those in the south of the country. 'Fascism always creeps up slowly,' a friend from Kerala (where the dominant language is Malayalam—[മലയാളം]) subsequently told me. 'It doesn't happen overnight.'

While the politics at play in these major events is relatively obvious (the Citizenship Amendment Act passed in December 2019—allowing Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from neighbouring countries to apply for Indian citizenship while denying the same right to Muslim migrants—is another disquieting example), the politics of language can be observed even in the micro-level interactions that form the majority of my own research.

On numerous occasions when sat in doctors' offices, I have seen patients arrive to do nothing more than empty their small bags of medicine onto the doctor's desk. What, they want to know, are they supposed to do with these drugs? The writing on the boxes and the silver foil trays is (save for the trade name of the pharmaceutical company—something deemed worthy of translation into Devanagari) all in English. Language demarcates access to certain knowledge and, in this case, the use of English, so often the *de facto* language of science, denies many of the patients for whom the drugs are (ostensibly) manufactured the possibility of knowledge regarding their intended use.

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The Biharis in the café were law students but, despite my curiosity, none could point me to the sections of legislature relevant to the status of different languages. A little time on Google Scholar later that night, however, was illuminating. Whether seen to be unifying or dominating, the supremacy of any particular language at the expense of others should be protected against by the Indian constitution.

When it was written, the authors included a section envisioned to protect the numerous minority languages within the country. It was intended that they be preserved and developed alongside the dominant languages (Verma 2001). But, as Gupta and Abbi (1995) note, in producing a list of privileged languages, the constitution has been far from successful in its aim of conveying linguistic equality. Instead, it has 'succeeded only in creating new cleavages, new hierarchies and new conflicts' (ibid., 5). The categorisation of languages in this way, they argue, has been reflected in differing public and political attitudes towards these languages, such that binary distinctions such as 'majority/minority' and 'dominant/subordinate' have become commonplace.

These were not factors that I had weighed up in my decision of which Indian language to study. In the low light of that café with good internet, however, I gained a fuller perspective of what I had waded into. Language is enmeshed within relations of power, distributed according to class, religion, education—it involves questions of legacy, identity, and ownership.

My discussion with the Biharis alerted me to this politics and cast a different light on my experiences in the field. When choosing a language, particularly as a visiting ethnographer, it is impossible to be neutral. However unwittingly, you pick a side in partisan struggles. In choosing a particular language in which to conduct fieldwork, you foreground the voices of those who speak that language, potentially side-lining more marginal, but no less vital, perspectives. Through my own low-level use of Hindi, I had not intended to lend my support to anyone; I had not foreseen my work as potentially contributing to the reification of

majority/minority distinctions. Yet this is the result of including within the frame of analysis only statements made in certain languages.

It is, particularly in the timeframe of a typical PhD, extremely difficult to learn multiple languages alongside the many other aspects of life and work that demand attention. But our choices in this regard deserve reflection. In my case, I had certainly not realised how deeply political the decision casually made in the colourful office of a London 'Modern Language Centre' would be revealed to be.

About the author

Nick Surawy Stepney is a PhD student and graduate teaching assistant at the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, King's College London. His research analyses the uneven availability of morphine in India, with a focus on Himachal Pradesh and the wider northwest region.

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