

Death of Vernaculars and Language Hegemony: An ethnography of the higher education sector in 21st century India

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Abstract. The paper examines how new age pedagogies and neoliberal policies consciously work towards “naturalizing” English language’s hegemony in institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in India. An ethnographic study the paper foregrounds the precarious positioning of non-English Indian languages *vis-à-vis* the pervading discourses of internationalization and education as job/skill oriented. Hegemony of English in the present is coupled with a restructuring of language departments as well as fleeting market demands for human capital. The paper also brings into question the role of the Internet and related technologies in reorganizing the linguistic dynamics of HE. Instead of democratizing, the Internet produces new monopolies in knowledge production, controls knowledge traffic from global North to South and further legitimizes the language hegemony. The paper argues that, in the last two decades, the neoliberal rupture has been leading HE institutions to a death of vernaculars within their physical, cultural and academic spaces.

Keywords: English language hegemony, HE in India, vernaculars, knowledge traffic, techno-globalisation, language departments

Introduction

Language preferences in the developmental and postcolonial contexts of Asia and Africa reflect critical ideological processes embedded in economic and power relations. Within these contexts linguistic choices are often renegotiated to condition their social systems including education. The “uncritical” acceptance of English as a universal lingua franca (Phillipson, 2017, p. 313) tempts to override the cultural and linguistic diversity of these regions. The hegemony of English in Indian context owes primarily to the early colonial interventions that remained more or less uncontested in the postcolonial

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times.

The paper examines a radical reproduction of language ideologies in sites of Higher Education (HE) in India amidst the ongoing techno-globalization. It foregrounds English language's hegemony as naturalized in nuanced forms and pushed under "covert language policies" of neoliberalism (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 23). HE institutions in general have a catalytic role in language shifts among students from vernacular to English. Through ethnography of a private autonomous college in a South Indian metropolis the paper observes a radical linguistic reorganisation of the campus undertaken in the past decade. While this is not a process that happens in IHE exclusively, universities and colleges, and the policies and managements that govern them, have a greater role in sanctifying the linguistic hegemonies.

The language situation elicits an array of questions including that of inadvertent exclusion of vernaculars, language transitions of individuals and communities, the socio-political dynamics of knowledge production and distribution, and that of job markets, social mobility and status enhancements. The paper seeks to elucidate how the global, empowering effect of English in the cultural-institutional milieu is prominent in conditioning the subjects' choice of language. Alongside this primary framing, the paper also observes the processes of language selection by students, the obsession with human capital and the way it is connected with language transitions as well as changing conceptions of nation, the bare survival of language departments in the private IHEs, as well as the issue of knowledge traffic and linguistic hegemony. In the end I have also briefly touched upon the recent language debates sparked off in the Indian public domain.

I have omitted public institutions from the ambit of this study. While there is more linguistic heterogeneity in state run universities and colleges most of them still use "English as the medium of instruction for all subjects". Even the three-tier language policy couldn't make a big difference in the way HE is imparted. This is compounded with "a flourishing private industry purporting to educate children through the medium of English" (Sridhar, 1996, p. 336). The current neoliberal context has led to an unconscious shift to skill-based education with active assistance from new age pedagogies. Primarily intended to match the industrial/corporate requirements of the country, English language skill is an integral part of this trend and is most explicit in private IHE (Kumaramkandath, 2020).

In the radically different current scenario where a larger shift to skill-based education and new age pedagogies are re-mapping educational contours in preparation for the industrial requirements of the country, allegiance towards English is most immaculately followed in private IHE (Kumaramkandath, 2020).

Linguistic hegemony

India, which has more than 500 languages and over 2,000 dialects still operational in its different parts, has the third largest number of people capable of speaking in English, after the USA and UK. While it is estimated that over 20 percent of Indians have exposure to English at various levels, Singh and Iyer

(2016) suggest that “at least 5 percent of the population (almost seventy million people- that is, double the population of Canada and three times that of Australia) have considerable, even near-native, fluency in English” (p. 212). The reinvention of language hegemony in the current times of techno-globalisation provides a paradigm shift in the linguistic mosaic of the subcontinent. Unlike in the erstwhile periods, shifting linguistic allegiance towards English is seen as natural and normal.

In the hyper-multilingual composition of Indian geography, language is central in the imagination of nation (Ahmad, 2005). The linguistic hegemony of English is closely associated with the evolution of the colonial and nationalist project of reforming and modernizing India since early to mid-19th century. While acquiescence of a linguistic order with English at the top was central to the British Raj in India, as subaltern theorists like Guha (1997) and Chatterjee (1994) have argued, the colonial policies were imperialist in nature, implying there was absence of cultural exchanges between the colonizer and the colonized. In the imperialist policies, Guha argued, the dominance of the British Raj and its lack of persuasion was evident. The imperialist language policies had the support of indigenous elites who had internalized the theory of Western superiority in the epistemic and material realms (Mukherjee, 2009; Naregal, 2001; Sen 2009). Education policies aimed to produce a social class whose “identity was partly constructed by the English language and whose access to the language was mediated by education” (LaDousa, 2014, p. 18). Access to English helped this small section of elites to secure the gatekeeping role by gaining specialized access to the venues of production. While this remained so, the political independence of the 1940s opened the opportunity for “the Indian independence leaders to usher in a new hegemonic project” (Sonntag, 2009, p. 10).

The new cultural hegemony inaugurated larger discourses of official language, national language and, in the same vein, attempts to standardize the vernaculars (Sonntag, 2003, 2009). In a Gramscian analysis, “linguistic hegemony exerts and legitimates power by presenting the dominant language as an instrument, or tool” (Suarez, 2002, p. 514). Linguistic hegemony operates by drawing upon discourses of individual and national progress and secures the consent of subalterns in the process (Sonntag, 2009; Ives 2004). The social, political and economic realms are further ordered to suit this linguistic hegemony. In the context of the 2006 National Knowledge Commission’s recommendations to introduce English language from class 1, an author argues that what was considered in the past as part of “imperial [language] policies” have come back as “solutions” to revive the society from the gross inequalities and to gather “social and economic opportunities” (Rao, 2008, p. 63).

Hegemony of English has a devastating impact on the local and indigenous languages, knowledge systems and cultures (Canagarajah, 2005; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). However, to place English in square opposition to other languages and cultures would not be fully justified. The empowering and integrative (Loomba, 1998; Warschauer, 2000) effect of English coincides with the “Indianisation of English” (Kachru, 1983) which nevertheless has a disempowering effect on other languages and their speakers. As Elkunchwar, an eminent Marathi writer, observed in the context of Indian English literature’s dominance over other language writings, that “Bhashas remain unimportant

not because literature of any merit is not produced in them. They are unimportant because the people who speak them are unimportant” (Singh & Iyer, 2016, p. 213).

The hegemony of English has taken massive strides in South Asia in the wake of globalization’s impact on its cultural and physical geographies. As opposed to its prior identity as a language of elites and upper-classes, English now symbolizes the class aspirations of non-elites and subalterns (Hamid & Jahan, 2019). This is despite structural disconnections like caste, class, region etc., still relevant and operating in its social worlds. The appropriation of English into education and myriad social sites is looked upon as essential to realize the class aspirations of the subalterns and the marginalized.

As a “language for international development” English has a central role in educational policies of non-English speaking locations (Sergeant & Erling, 2011). Global ideologies of language and employment opportunities have changed so much that English language is deemed inevitable for communities and individuals to be not “excluded from the global distribution of wealth and welfare” (Sergeant & Erling, 2011, p. 249). The intimate association of English with everyday lives in non-English geographies has far-reaching consequences. Among others, it “threaten(s) to contaminate or wipe out local languages and cultures . . . [and] skews the socio-economic order in favour of those who are proficient in English” (Murray, 2006, p. 204). The paper revisits this linguistic hegemony and its increasing moral weight on the Indian common sense: a trend exacerbated with economic globalisation through new age pedagogies.

Field and method

The paper results from fieldwork and interactions during 2017–2019. What started as a seminar paper in early 2017 on language movements later developed into an ethnographic project on language choices. It takes everyday lives within the campus, its linguistic structuring and the permeating ideologies, as points of departure and its problematic. My positioning *vis-à-vis* the research needs to be specified here as I worked in similar environment. While this warranted a conscious distancing from my own subjective presumptions, pre-knowledge of the space, its epistemic frameworks as well as the dynamics of HE system in the country helped me in designing the research and in fixing the themes.

As Ellis (2004) sought to understand the role of “I” in ethnography, that, ethnographic projects are “relational, about the other and the ‘I’ in interaction” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Ethnographic research elicits questions of researchers’ subjectivity and the power imbalance between the researcher and the subjects. The power dynamics may potentially lead to the othering of the researched which could be avoided through greater awareness of and a constant reengagement with the researcher’s own positionality (Lønsmann, 2016). Ethnographic research straddles the middle ground between the positivist assumptions of objectivity and the dangers of involving subjective elements (Freebody, 2003; Méndez, 2013; Silverman, 2000). “Within ethnography, the question of objectivity and subjectivity is of crucial importance” (Hegelund, 2005, p. 647). My own role as a professor has played a formative role in this

research. The observations in this paper have arisen out of a process which, as Lønsmann (2016) had observed, the “ethnographic researcher was very much a part ‘of’ rather than remaining neutral to the surroundings” (p. 13).

A brief methodical description of the site and my own fieldwork may not be out of place here. The private college is more homogenous owing to the unambiguous management style of administration and its dependence on English as *lingua franca* in the campus. Started as a second-grade college in 1880s, the college operated as a government-aided institution until 2005 when it became an autonomous college bringing changes in its ideological and administrative structuring. Interviews were conducted with the knowledge and consent of participants and field notes were prepared while some were recorded with their permission, especially those conducted over telephone. Most interactions were informal while some remained formal. The conversations were more thematically organised than following a question answer method. By and large, the conversations with professors surrounded their experiences with Indian languages in campus, their observations about students’ use of language, directives and measurements from management in this regard, classroom presentations, students’ preference of courses and their employment weightage, the procedures and priorities behind curriculum design and syllabus creation etc. With professors in language department, additional issues concerning language options, the status of language teaching and the department’s functioning in the past and the present were also raised. Except curriculum and language department issues, the same themes were invoked with students additionally asking about their domestic linguistic preferences and language socialization. Due to lack of space, I haven’t covered the latter topics in detail in this paper. Altogether close to 25 professors and 30 students from various departments were interviewed. The college was technically divided into three, namely the regular college (known as the day college), the evening college and the commerce college. The latter divisions consisted of about 2,000 students each whereas the regular college had close to 8,000 students.

Language and knowledge economy: Private college in a metropolis

Sites of education are deeply enmeshed in language ideologies. The college retains a uniglot environment despite its multi-cultural combination, with students from different lingual backgrounds and from different parts of India and abroad. Monolingualism on campus is imposed through loose (participative) and tight (directive) organizational regimes (Sagie, 1997), on par with emerging corporate cultures. The linguistic structure of the campus sidelines all other languages as insignificant. Including Hindi, non-English languages are used informally, away from surveillance and within small groups and commonly perceived as local and geographically restricted. In the era of neoliberalism, the language economy of educational institutions, in postcolonial-developmental contexts is conditioned to match the middle-class ideologies of the target groups of students and parents. Signifying a common trend, the promise of English as an integral component of HE reaches its full throttle in private colleges

and universities articulating compliance with the commercial matrix.

“Ideologies of language . . . are not only about language” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, pp. 55–56); they critically connect language to questions of identities and morality and sustain and reproduce old forms of inequalities. They shape our understandings of languages and project the same “onto people, events, and activities” (Gal & Irvine, 1995, p. 970). Language ideologies are consolidated in schools and colleges to their maximum potential. The uncontested projection of English as lingua franca of the campus draws from both the praxeology associated with the multilingual backgrounds of students and its implicit acceptance as a language of progress, development and individual mobility. The everydayness of the college provides insights into its reassertion in subtle forms. The ingenious creation of the cultural-physical and academic/non-academic environment of the campus combines the hybrid elements of cosmopolitanism and convent culture without uniforms. The hybrid identity consciousness of students combined with the upscale consumption of ideas and materials is a fertile ground for reasserting linguistic hegemony. In addition to learning and teaching the college authorities insist that all communications—oral and written—be made only in English. This norm is meticulously followed within its boundaries including playgrounds and lifts. Students often switched to English in the presence of senior professors and top management officials.

HE is commonly perceived as the final phase of education before the adult is ready for the job market. Connecting HE with employment reveals a larger strategy and convergence of state and management objectives with the demands of industry and parents’ ambitions. I shall come back to this in a while. The linguistic structuring of HE heavily draws from the Medium of Instruction (MOI) debates that surround schooling in South Asia (Attanayake, 2020; Barnard, 2018; Hamid & Jahan, 2015, 2019; Hamid et al., 2014). English is deemed an inevitable component of education in neoliberal discourses on the MOI (Attanayake, 2020).

English language education begins from the early phases of children’s socialization and continued to the schooling and later to the college and university. Parental expectations about the outcome of education as well as the accumulation of cultural capital play a central role in the medium of education of their children and in the choice of institutions (Botelho, 2006; Gurney, 2018). In their early socialisation, language ideologies play a greater role in the acquiescence of language hegemony and in language transitions (Riley, 2011). To enhance language learning, parents handpick fairytales, animation videos and so on just as they meticulously choose the school and college for their children.

Astha, a student whose parents belong to two different places, with Tamil as her mother’s first language and Punjabi as her father’s, can however read and write only in English. Notwithstanding the need for more empirical research and statistics on this topic, instances of such language shifts are not uncommon among middle class families settled in Indian cities (Rai, 2012). Family, as a site of learning, reinstates the superior status of English during the early socialisation of children. Parents eagerly send their children to English medium schools and gradually make English a spoken language in domestic spaces. This helps children learn English in the most “natural” ways. While this is truer in urban centres,

students from non-urban locations or with a local/regional identity carry deep seated concerns about their linguistic profile. As an author observed in the context of private schools in Delhi, students from economically weaker sections and poor in English “go through an extended phase of muteness and incomprehensibility before they finally pick up the language” (Mohan, 2014, p. 19). HE is a significant temporal moment when students’ coming of age is combined with adulthood aspirations. Knowledge of English, its fluency and accent controls students’ socialization within the campus and occupies central significance in shaping and unfolding their ambitions.

Human capital and language choices

The hybrid identity consciousness of students converges with the preconditions of career markets and with questions of cultural and social capital. In the modern knowledge economy, universities and colleges are “encouraged to develop links with industry and business in a series of new venture partnerships” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 313). Autonomous colleges, at the cusp of becoming a university, are required to fulfil the latter roles in order to migrate. Apart from teaching and learning they inculcate pedagogic practices and impart skill sets matching industrial standards and expectations. English language skills often figure as pre-requirements of this whole frame.

On the material advantage of English language in Globalized India, a study identifies that “[the] hourly wages are on average 34% higher for men who speak fluent English and 13% for men who speak a little English relative to men who speak no English” (Azam et al., 2013, pp. 335–336). According to the authors, beyond trade and commerce with the outside world, “English is not the only possible *lingua franca*, it is a *natural* [emphasis added] one given India’s colonial past and given the influence of the United States in the world economy” (Azam et al., 2013, p. 338). The over sweeping discourse of human capital and education (Abbas, 2000; Fontana & Srivastava 2009; Shastry, 2012; Viswanath et al., 2009) brings language and the job market in a direct and a seemingly plausible connection.

Human capital is as much central to conceptions of success in the market and economic prosperity as it is to reduction of inequalities. It finetunes the commonplace imaginations of national progress. Nevertheless, the centrality of language ideologies in human capital produces a counter effect by keeping a large segment of students from HE. As an author observed, “[a]bout six million students (40% of all enrolled students) from non-metropolitan India enter the system every year and fail to achieve their educational goals because they are unable to cope with English” (Niranjana, 2013, p. 14). The reverse effect of the predominant conceptions of human capital on a vast number of languages and its native speakers needs further exploration.

Human capital and language are at the centre of imaginations of nation as well. Students, parents and teachers revealed different imaginations of nation with varying perceptions of education. Students who endorsed the role of English spoke of nation as resting on such indicators as economic growth, higher FDIs, better infrastructure etc., whereas those who opted non-English languages for their second

language courses spoke of nation for its cultural heterogeneity. Language choices in education embody conceptions of nation (LaDousa, 2005). IHE, especially private colleges and universities, epitomize the imagination of nation in alignment with market where language transition or shift on the part of students is not a choice but rather comes with the system. Albeit this doesn't lead to a total distancing of the subjects from their vernacular cultures, the latter is definitely sidelined in the institutionalized and corporatized imaginations of nation and its knowledge-language interplays.

Amidst these broader events students also make wilful choices *vis-à-vis* the language question. The “usefulness” of language is often raised as a random concern with increased legitimacy. The hidden curriculum in the campus, consisting of practices and norms that reinforce the persistent cultural beliefs and ideologies, is designed to meet the agendas of their parents and other stakeholders (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015). As a student asked the question, during an interaction, about the need to retain her mother tongue in the face of an institutional space where, despite pluralities, “only one language has both body and soul”. This, she said, is “going to be the case forever in life”. She narrated that she has not come across an institution where English is not the norm although her whole studies were completed in India. Her mother tongue is only a thin line connecting her with her roots, by which she meant her family and “tradition”, which is more or less disconnected with her exterior world, a world of jobs, friends and strangers.

The precarious language department

The language department comprised all non-English languages taught in the college. The campus being surrounded in the hegemony of English its extreme precariousness was evident in its structuring. Understaffed and still waning in strength it reflected conspicuous disinterest of the state as well as management *vis-à-vis* regional languages in HE. Language departments were initially formed in colleges and universities in line with the “three language formula” that the postcolonial Indian state had followed from the beginning (Petrovic & Majumdar, 2010). Mandatory in the school system this was followed in spirit in the HE system although English was undisputedly accepted as the first language in HE. Other languages were often available as “options”, commonly labelled as “second languages”. This further depended upon factors such as the location of and their availability in the individual institutions etc.

In the last ten years or so, especially in private HE institutions, a clear shift has occurred with all non-English languages often dealt in one department as opposed to retaining them under different individual identities. Concurrent with the transition from government-aided to autonomous/private status, this shift signifies a near language death situation within the physical space of the campus. Owing to the late 1990s' globalization boom and its obsession with human capital with English skills, the situation has led to a massive decline in the demand for other languages. This also redefines English language skills more as “cultural competence that comes from familiarity with culture” (Sen, 2009, p. 120) than merely as communicative skills or knowledge of language.

The transition to autonomous status involved a restructuring of the language department with minimal recruitment of faculty to non-English Indian languages. In the past the college used to offer courses separately in Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Sanskrit, Hindi, and Arabic, as core papers as well as “second” languages. This is no longer the case from 2005 when the system was dismantled to form a common department. Besides removing Telugu, Malayalam, and Arabic from language options, no languages are taught as core papers any longer in the campus to the students.

Another related development is the incorporation of “Add English” as an optional paper that students can choose to replace language papers. Allowing the management and students equally to circumvent the mandatory provision of language education in undergraduate courses, Add English paper is held as the primary reason for the massive reduction in the number of students choosing language courses. Still regulated by the university norms of the country the individual managements nevertheless are at liberty to decide on the status of language education. For instance, it is still mandatory that students who have studied a regional language in their higher secondary classes should continue with the same for their UG courses as well. However, if their respective language is unavailable in their admitted institution of HE, they are at liberty to choose other language options including the Add English paper. This is often manipulated, and management keeps Add English on the platter for the satiation of students and parents at large. Indian language education in the campus is increasingly looked upon as a mismatch between the expected outcomes of education and students own interests and expectations. Add English paper is thus an effective “ideological bridge” between the management and the students.

With around ten members, the language department had to cater to the non-English (Indian language) requirements of more than ten thousand students scattered across three colleges that worked independently under the same management. However, as very few students opt Indian language papers, the teacher student ratio is not threatened justifying the low strength of professors. The actual number of professors and the languages they teach was as follows:

Table 1. Teachers for Indian language education in the university

Name of language	Number of teachers
Kannada	4
Hindi	3
Sanskrit	1
Tamil	1

I have omitted teachers for other foreign languages including German, French and Spanish. Half of those teaching Indian languages were part-time faculty. With senior professors, recruited while the college was government aided, retiring in about five years “a complete switch to Add English courses is awaiting us”, according to a Kannada professor. “Students with knowledge of their parents’ language dwindle every year,” a Hindi professor said. “It is common that in classes of hundred or more students,

less than twenty have working knowledge in their mother tongues out of which only very few chose Indian language as their option". Simultaneously the increasing demand for non-English foreign languages like French, Spanish, German etc., is gradually transforming the role of language departments to that of a foreign languages department. The deteriorating language scenario is treated with silence, both inside and outside. The persisting language ideologies render such changes insignificant whereas the discontent among a few teaching faculty of other Indian languages is more isolated and lingering in the apolitical climate of the private college.

Language departments are, by and large, sustained independently in the state and public HE institutions despite a serious decline in its demand. However, its non-obligatory nature has left the private managements in a state of complete freedom to deal with the question of language education in their campuses. With the decline in demand, language courses are withdrawn gradually. There exist no courses in the college where a non-English language is the core/main subject. Signifying a wide trend, no Indian languages, including the local vernacular Kannada, are offered as core/main subject in any colleges in the whole metropolis.

The system "second language", sometimes addressed as "third language", symbolizes uncontested language ideologies in HE. It reverses the precept "English as a second language", commonly used in policy and academic discussions, in HE whereas English is placed in a primary position from the beginning. The term second language, signifying all non-English Indian languages available in the campus, invokes a politically and historically rooted hierarchy of languages. A colonial legacy the language hierarchy has continued to the 21st century with critical proportions. From Wood's despatch in 1854, English has remained the sole language for imparting HE in India. The restructuring and confining of the language department is one explicit sign of the blind endorsement of language ideologies and the systematic ejection of other languages from the sites of HE.

In a sense, the *othering* of all non-English Indian languages finds its consolidation in the politics of nomenclature including that of "second language". The rubric language department is another one. Contradicting the generosity behind the title "department of English", it, on the one hand erases the individual identity of Indian languages in the campus and, except Sanskrit, identifies them as "languages" associated with specific geographies. On the other hand, such naming and the pedagogic practices keep the status of English at par like Physics or Chemistry and as a skill that defies both disciplinary and geographic borders; it cannot be considered merely as a "language". The poor treatment of the language department goes alongside the hidden objective of enhancing the naturalized learning of English in the campus. The abated language department with alarmingly low strength—of both students and teachers—signifies the growing lack of vernacular sensibility or any conscious intent to sustain them. The long endured static role of English as the primary language of HE has been further intensified with its projection as "a language of opportunity and a vital means of improving prospectus for well-paid employment" (British Council, 2009, p. 3). The uniglot character of the campus and its lack of resistance to the hegemony of English are complete with the degeneration of the language department.

Knowledge traffic and Internet-induced knowledge spectacles

The global spread of the English language has serious implications for the processes of knowledge production and dissemination. On the one hand, the hegemony of English language has serious impacts on the ways in which academics is practiced and perceived in HE institutions by controlling its outcomes. On the other hand, course materials are produced, and pedagogic practices designed keeping in mind the ideological interests of the upper and an aspiring middle classes. This section attempts to cover the subtle dynamics of curriculum designing undertaken in the college that indicates the emerging trends in the field of HE. I attempt to foreground how new digital initiatives simulate old models and reproduce the hegemonies with an aggravated effect on linguistic plurality. The knowledge-language economy and its industrial connects are embedded in the global circuits of power and controls the flow of knowledge (Altbach, 2007). Amidst this planning of curriculum and related tasks become processes with larger “social implications beyond the academic ones” (Sen, 2009, p. 119).

Previously the success of colonialism depended on the sanctification of knowledge corridors that allowed a more or less one way traffic of knowledge systems, from the West to the East. This is fully legitimized in the current era of digital technologies. As Spivak (1991) observed during an interview with Robert Young, the colonially established networks of knowledge production and dissemination play “a more subtler role” in neocolonialism (p. 221). By now it is academic common sense that despite the official end of colonialism the erstwhile socio-political structures of power exert a critical influence on the cultural-knowledge systems (Wijesinghe et al., 2019). Albeit the controls have significantly shifted from the British to the US in the post Second World War period, as observed by many including Edward Said, the Eurocentric systems of knowledge production have more or less been sustained through economic and political differences.

Knowledge traffic—the process of knowledge production and the control over its flow—in the contemporary is different from its past versions where it was often translated to Indian languages. The internet, on the contrary, brings knowledge producing and receiving centres, mainly students as well as teachers, in direct contact through the singularities of technology and language. Readers in these regions access websites, mostly of universities and research institutes in the US and/or English-speaking locations in Europe especially the UK, for knowledge and information. Knowledge, in such cases, has a very instrumental connotation and is mostly transported without intermediaries including publication houses. Thus, while the Internet carries promises of democratising knowledge production (Shrum, 2005), in practice it produces new monopolies, and consolidates and increases the divisions.

The excess of knowledge traffic unfolds in the convergence of new age technology with pedagogic practices including, most importantly, the creation of syllabuses. During my ethnographic exploration through the department meetings and interviews as well as participation in casual conversations between professors, it was evident that professors developed syllabuses for different courses they are about to teach in meetings that lasted for 60–90 minutes. “With laptops connected through Wi-Fi, it is not

difficult to *access the different sources* lying scattered; If a teacher knows very well *where to find readings and who are the authors*, preparing a syllabus in one sitting is quite recommended as it will save too much of time” a professor in the comparative literature department said during an interview [emphasis added]. The aeonian chains of deadlines in private IHEs often converge with technological sophistication. “The *effortless* access to internet brings readymade syllabuses, books and other study materials to the fingertips; it also helps universities and teachers to *internationalise* the courses they offer” [emphasis added], a professor in the department of Psychology added.

Knowledge traffic owes to the ideological structuring of HE in the country and its different bodies of administration still premised on the old colonial principles. There is a stark absence of serious attempts to localise or glocalise the “global” knowledge systems; the blind endorsement of old hierarchies coupled with excessive dependence on new age technologies lead centres of HE to replicate and reproduce instead of producing new knowledge. As Guri-Rosenblit (2015) observes, “governments around the world are obsessed at present with establishing world-class-universities, dominated currently by leading research universities from the US, and a handful of universities in the UK and a few other countries” (p. 14). In their study of HE in South Korea, Piller and Cho (2013) observe that internationalization as a ranking criterion is often easily manipulated to favour the spread of English (p. 23).

Internationalisation legitimises the breathless flow of curricula and syllabi from West to East, opening the floodgates for Western centric knowledge practices to enter the academic common sense of the global South almost seamlessly. The linguistic hegemony central to this is in addition to the politics of knowledge in education in times of globalization (Rata, 2012). This works hand in glove with issues of time pressure for professors leading them to overtly rely on sources convenient to access. In the case of privately managed institutes of HE, the intensity of the situation is greater for their market-oriented projections, such that they from time to time have to resort to this language of international standards; this language is further endorsed by state and the public as effective means for individual students’ success and the institution’s excellence. This has a direct impact on local knowledge systems and languages. The fleeting market demands hardly leave much room to incorporate discussions, books and other materials produced outside of the dominant cultures. Knowledge traffic is naturalised in such contexts where flow of knowledge is heavily controlled by new age technologies and further mediated by definitions of legitimacy.

It plays a vital role in conditioning the academic and non-academic/institutional environment within the college. Teachers as well as students excessively rely on internet search machines for study materials as well as for information about ideas and authors. There is a discourse of “proper” and “legitimate” knowledge that further authorizes this knowledge flow in the 21st century; knowledge produced and made available in English and circulated through foreign university websites and textbooks are commonly accepted as standard knowledge forms (Akena, 2012). Instances and case studies totally disconnected to the local and national contexts flood classroom discussions. More

applicable to social sciences where “students often cite examples from US for discussing the covered topics in class. ... I wonder if they remain absolutely ignorant about their immediate surroundings”, a professor of History commented. However, teachers often ranked students citing more examples from abroad highly as they are assumed to be “well read” as a Psychology professor remarked.

For foreign examples plenty of sources are available on internet whereas for local discussions one must rely on one’s own volition on most occasions. According to Nikitha, a second-year undergraduate student in the Humanities department, “students [for assignments and classroom presentations] come to class with readymade materials available from internet, even including PowerPoint slides, and give their presentations. ... Most often such presentations are orchestrated overnight by piecing together the information available from various sources”. English language skills play a central role in such Internet-induced knowledge spectacles. Students with very good command over English often performed better in class and institutional level activities. Technology and cultural capital–English language skills and its embodiment, work together to produce a new discourse of success.

There is also the pragmatics of convenience and familiarity that underpin knowledge traffic on its receiving end. The Internet not only assembles a large body of knowledge into one space, but it also saves considerable amount of time which otherwise is spend in libraries. Besides, “students are unhappy if we cite regional examples. But everyone *understands* if we take a video or an instance from the US culture; on most occasions this helps in students judging us highly also” [emphasis added], a professor of management studies observed. The overt reliance on the Internet literally keeps anything that is local from the domain of classroom interactions. The discourse of familiarity and convenience permeates both the teaching and student communities. During one of the interactions a professor of life sciences narrated her experience with a student who, a couple of years back, came to her seeking assistance for an assignment on *Tulasi*—an aromatic plant found in the southeast Asian tropics with medicinal value. “However”, the teacher narrated, “later she changed her topic as she couldn’t find much resourceful materials about the plant either in the online space or in the university library. All that she could find was some encyclopaedic entries”.

A problematising of knowledge traffic cannot be undertaken without reinstating the old binaries of East and West, English and vernacular or global and local. However, techno-globalisation has aggravated the old processes and has led to a heavy monopolization of the channels of knowledge flow. Looking at it broadly, the question of induced knowledge traffic in the digital era then not only reproduces the hegemony of English but it also impedes seriously the question of knowledge production. On the one hand, it keeps the local domain outside the realm of knowledge production and, on the other, it reduces the scope of knowledge production to definite paradigms of “authentic” knowledge. Just as language transition knowledge traffic is a historically embedded process that critically contains the role of vernacular languages and cultures in the HE spectrum.

The policy scenario

A detailed analysis of the policy level debates or interventions is not in scope of this paper. However briefly alluding to the sphere becomes pertinent especially in the current time where language debates are being reinvented in the public domain by the current right wing Indian government. In fact, language debates had a central role in the very introduction of modern education in India during the colonial period in the first half of 19th century. The entire debate between the Orientalists and the Utilitarian on education in India was not only on what subjects to teach but also on what medium to use while teaching. A consolidation of this debate was arrived at with the passing of English Education Act of 1835 by the East India Company administration and by passing the Woods despatch of 1854 (Basu, 1982). Post the Macaulay's minutes of 1832 and the subsequent legislations, English was made a compulsory part of school curriculum along with science, mathematics, history etc. by the second half of the century (Kumar, 1996). By 1915 English was already in the top list of popular subjects among Indian students and parents (Preeti, 2016).

As mentioned above in the section on the precarious language department this colonial legacy has created a language hierarchy that has gone deeply into Indian mindsets. While there is a growing realization of this in the current liberal-leftist discourses a clearly defined policy intervention that can make radical changes and bring the focus back on multilingualism that doesn't compromise the focus on both mother tongue and English in the education systems is still in waiting. On the other hand, as I briefly elucidate below, the current Indian government has come up with attempts that instead, purport to reverse the English hegemony with Hindi.

The of late attempts either impose Hindi, the demographically superior language spoken majorly in the politically dominant Northern parts of the country, as a counter challenge to English or have taken the form of providing the "option" of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the local schools as stipulated in the New Education Policy of 2020 (NEP 2020). The former step, infused with a heavy dose of nationalism and proposed by the official language committee headed by the home minister, is already opposed vehemently by most non-Hindi speaking states in India, especially those in the South. While there is an entire history of resistance to imposing Hindi as compulsory language in education the recent attempts have only helped in rekindling the passionate debates where English is again idolised as the only solution.

The NEP 2020, on the other hand, is a scanty and perfunctory attempt to reinstate mother tongues back into education. The term mother tongue has been a perpetual presence in policy documents concerning education starting from the "Woods despatch" of 1854, considered to be the *magna carta* of Indian education. From colonial period onwards policies were made to have mother tongue at the school level and English at the HE levels of education. This bilanguage policy was converted into a three-language formula in the post independent India by inserting Hindi into the linguistic paradigm. Nevertheless, the hegemony of English grew unquestionably since the linguistic balance of the country

was always subject to the larger socio-political milieus still influenced by erstwhile colonial legacy coupled with the monoglot private sector's increasing role in the local and global economy.

The NEP 2020's recommendation to pursue mother tongue education as the "preferred" MOI till standard V or even VIII is nonetheless a replication of a more than 150-year-old direction that has failed as many times (Kumaramkandath, 2020). The schools and IHEs, especially those in the private sector, are in no way placed under any obligation to shift their medium to the local language as it still remains a suggestion. On the other hand, the current right-wing government has been using this as a valid ground for their attempts to replace English with Hindi hegemony. The official language committee mentioned above has already suggested having Hindi as the main language in most technical institutes including the internationally reputed IITs under the guise of promoting mother tongue education. A clear attempt to replace the hegemony of English with Hindi, these attempts under the guise of nationalism and a deformed version of localism have no plans for the students from vast non-Hindi speaking areas inside the country. Such policy recommendations also do not have any plans for the large number of languages including the officially recognized classical languages except Hindi and Sanskrit—a sacred language of Hindus (Brittas, 2022; Mathew, 2022; Niazi, 2022).

Conclusion

A staggering homogeneity—both linguistic and cultural—has been introduced to the sites of HE through new age pedagogic practices in neoliberal times. This homogeneity is nevertheless celebrated commonly as signifying cosmopolitanism and knowledge hybridity. With uniglot campuses no longer uncommon in South Asia, there is an urgent need to address this incongruity within academics as well as in policies. As Altbach (2007) has observed in the context of Africa where "no university offers instruction in any indigenous language" (p. 3608), a similar situation has been incited in South Asia where death of vernaculars within campuses are part of systematic efforts undertaken by the stakeholders including the state, management, parents, and the teaching community. This drastically contradicts the founding ideals of pluralism of Indian HE system (Guha, 2007); hegemony of English is not only implicit and silent but also imposes monolingualism.

The gaps in this field demand urgent, conceptually and empirically rich, explorations. The reverse impact of the uncontested "first language" status of English in HE system on the medium of instruction debates and the parental decisions at the school levels requires further corroborations and remains by and large unexplored. The choice of medium at the school level is a dynamic and future-oriented process undertaken by parents and substantially influenced by the medium of HE.

The undisputed ordering of languages as second and third, with the "first" always being absent in discourses, depicts the blind endorsement of language ideologies in HE. We need further statistics of the rapid flow of students to English optional papers in order to substitute Indian language learning as also about the closing down of language departments across the region, two signifiers of increased

language transitions in neoliberal times. As Ghodke (2016) observed in his study that “[t]he end product of this language shift is a complete replacement or language death” (p. 197). Gaining command over the English language for upward mobility is a historically embedded practice among the middle and upper classes. However, the current HE scenario denies any possibilities of linguistic coexistence.

Language ideologies in HE are sustained through a plurality of discourses that include the discourse of internationalizing the institutes and the discourse of skills. The latter, for instance, redefines language as skill connecting it directly to the ‘education for employment’ discourses. This predominant frame deems English language skills as inevitable to participate in the “financial, political and knowledge economies . . . conducted at a global level, and which therefore rely on modes of international communication” (Sergeant & Erling, 2011, p. 54).

English language hegemony in HE is at the centre of the discourse of internationalization and, critically, reproduces conventional knowledge networks. This is despite the techno-globalization and centrality of technology in the current teaching-learning processes. The advent of the Internet and related technologies heightens the possibilities of participation of students and communities in distant places in knowledge production (Shrum, 2005). Nevertheless, as observed above, the knowledge production and reception divisions are more pronounced and aligned on the global North-South divisions in the current age of technology. The Internet combines technology and language to reproduce conventional knowledge networks normalizing both the one-sided flow of knowledge as well as the implicit hegemony of the English language.

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