Discomfort as a Method: Language, Education and Politics of Knowledge Production

Introduction

Language connects us. It is through language/s that we make sense of the world around us. But, what if language (in)competence unsettles us? Could this discomfort serve as a methodological tool to explore the relationship between linguistic practices and the broader social and political forces? I confronted one such issue of linguistic (in)competence and strong discomfort with language/s during my DPhil research. Every research is a linguistically-mediated process. In my case, language was also the topic of the research. I conducted fieldworks in two mother-tongue education schools in Nepal: Jagat Sundar Bwonekuthi (JSB) in Kathmandu and Jana Kalyan Higher Secondary School (JKHSS) located in Kapilbastu. In my research I was trying to understand the ways different constituents in these schools engaged with and navigated various linguistic tensions. As the research evolved, I became acutely aware of my own varying levels of exposure to as well as the levels of comfort in three different languages: Nepal Bhasa, Nepali and English. I gradually began to re-think my (in)competence in every language I had encountered and used throughout my research career. I did not feel comfortable in any of the languages. All three languages occupy different positions in language hierarchy, and as I moved through higher education, the implications of that linguistic hierarchy became even more pronounced.

Although I belong to the Newar community and Nepal Bhasa is my mother tongue, I have limited oral fluency in it. Nor do I know how to read and write it because my mother tongue was not taught in school. Nepali is the language I use for everyday communication and I have some written proficiency in Nepali, mostly developed during the ten years of school education. However, I also do not have academic writing proficiency in Nepali, as is common amongst certain middle-class groups, typically educated in private schools in Kathmandu. Similarly, with the limited foundational training in English language in Nepal, I have always had to seek editing support to ensure that my academic writings meet publication standards. Having straddled three languages at varying levels of proficiency, I feel constant discomfort in all three of them.

From this experience of not having full fluency in any one particular language, I became acutely aware of the language hierarchies and the politics of knowledge embedded in those hierarchies. In this paper, I draw on my uncomfortable encounters with three different languages to discuss what they reveal about everyday language hierarchies and how those experiences shaped my overall research framework of studying language education. The aims of this paper are twofold. First, I use "discomfort as a method" to explore a potential for understanding the conditions within which such experiences are produced. Second, through this method, I explore the idea of "unequal multilingualism" in order to understand the politics of everyday language exchanges. In doing so, I want to push the debate from whether people have the right and competence to speak different languages to understanding conditions in which meanings of different languages are constructed and performed by their speakers (Heller 2006; Irvine and Gal 2000). This perspective, I argue, allows us to understand unequal multilingualism in Nepal through its intimate ties to varieties of knowledge systems and socio-political relations.

Instead of dismissing discomfort as a mere subjective position, it can act as a constructive lens in helping us understand the role broader historical and political forces play in how different languages derive meanings and are performed. In other words, language (in)competence is not a neutral process. Rather it is embedded in social and linguistic relationships, and is inflected by "moral and political interests" (Irvine 1989: 255). Given the unequal multilingualism in Nepal, the justifications guiding the use of language education for minoritized languages cannot be based only on market-based principles for mere instrumental value. Instead, it needs to be led by a genuine effort to reclaim varieties of worldviews and push the boundaries of possibility for the minoritized communities. Drawing on emerging scholarship that have highlighted the inadequacy of neoliberal free market ideology to evaluate the use of minoritized language, "discomfort as a method" centres everyday multilingual practice to revisit the idea of (in)competence. The "language work" practised in mother tongue schools could create spaces for languages that otherwise remain conspicuous by their absence (Rai 2021). I conclude with some reflections on the implications this framing has on the meanings of education and the process of knowledge production in higher education.

"Discomfort" as a Method

Between August 2013 and March 2014, as part my DPhil, I conducted ethnographic fieldworks in Jagat Sundar Bwonekuthi (JSB) in Kathmandu and Jana Kalyan Higher Secondary School (JKHS) in Kapilbastu. I followed up with additional visits in 2016 and 2017. JSB offered Nepal Bhasa as an instructional language for all grades. JKHSS, on the other hand, offered Dangaura Tharu as the language of instruction from grade one through three. My initial fieldwork days were filled with excitements trying to understand the ways in which new languages were introduced in formal education. Afterall, it was only following the People's Movement in 1990 that the Constitution of Nepal recognized Nepal as a multi-lingual (*bahu bhāsik*) nation and envisaged primary education in the mother tongue as a fundamental right (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton 1997). The Nepali state's official adoption of minority languages in education was a radical departure. During the king-led Panchayat rule, use of any other national language other than Nepali was considered communal and was against the law.

I soon discovered that entering the "field" to conduct research on language education was an unsettling process for me. For the first time in my life, I encountered my mother tongue (Nepal Bhasa) in an institutional setting. It opened up complex dynamics of language use in a public space. Prior to this, my exposure to Nepal Bhasa was limited to private space of home and community. Though I was born and brought up in a Newar family in Kathmandu and had conversational fluency in Nepal Bhasa, I did not receive any formal training in Nepal Bhasa and never learnt how to read and write it. When I returned "home" after almost a decade, it was a very different "home" than the one I was familiar with. For me, mother-tongue school was a new idea. Both due to the lack of personal experience in attending such schools and also because these schools were not possible in pre-1990 Nepal. Following the constitutional changes in the 1990s, language, ethnicity, and identity had gained prominence in public spheres. The unprecedented growth of independent FM radios, television channels, and print media publications in the erstwhile minority languages further facilitated the proliferation of those languages (Maharjan 2002; Onta 2009) in public spheres. Being aware that it was a very different "home" than the one I grew up in, I sought to understand the changing landscape of mother-tongue education in Nepal. In doing so, I began to appreciate the multiple layers and dynamic nature of selfhood, shaped by ever-altering modalities of embodied social interactions and dialogues (Narayan 1993). Thus, while these fieldwork

encounters were conducted in a supposedly familiar place and language, they opened up new ways of understanding language education, research, and knowledge production. The fieldwork also forced me to confront my limited competence in Nepal Bhasa. I struggled to converse in it especially in the classroom and in formal settings, which remained a source of anxiety and discomfort throughout my fieldworks. During my research I had to continuously confront that reality. My exposure to formal education in a minority language, and my discomfort with it, however, opened up new ways of approaching language education.

Going beyond the conceptualisation of discomfort as merely a personal experience, I utilize the field encounters as a method to understand subjective experience itself as a socio-historic formation. In this, I draw on the growing body of scholarship which argues that emotions are a product of relational, discursive, and socio-material dynamics (Ahmed 2014; Behar 1997). Being attentive to the actions generated by emotions can either open up or shut down certain ways of knowing or making sense of the world. Utilizing "discomfort as an epistemic resource" (Chadwick 2021) in "reflexivities of discomfort" (Giabiconi 2013) can act as a method for knowledge production. The recent scholarly turn to affective methodologies (Knudsen and Stage 2015) has also opened up spaces to explore embodied feelings both theoretically and methodologically, and link them to broader socio-political issues. As Chadwick points out, centring and making discomfort visible may serve as an analytic tool in allowing us to confront how individuals are "positioned in relation to histories of domination and inequality" (Chadwick 2021).

Discomfort often inspires avoidance. One tries to escape or sidestep the experience that generates discomfort. But to "dwell on" or "stay with" discomfort for analytic work can be generative in confronting the relations of power and inequality (Haraway 2016). My comfortable and privileged middle-class position had hitherto allowed me to avoid the use of Nepal Bhasa in formal settings, unless it was completely unavoidable. Neither did avoiding it hinder my educational and professional career, especially in the context of Nepal where Nepali and English languages are used for all official communication. However, once I spent more time in Nepal Bhasa classrooms, I began "studying" Nepal Bhasa for the first time. As I appreciated the time and labour required to gain mastery over the language, I noticed the varying proficiency I had in reading, writing, and speaking Nepal Bhasa. My absolute incompetence in using my mother tongue for written work, teaching an academic subject, and reading the newspapers, uncovered many ways in which various kinds of language

competence – speaking, reading, and writing – are erroneously seen as synonymous to each other.

The fieldwork encounters in the supposedly familiar locations (my "home") and familiar language(s) were key to making sense of a plural and fractured space – from where the relationship to the self and others are often imagined and practised. I soon realized that most of my competence in Nepali came from years of "correction", repetition, training, and examination in the schools, including from the language socialisation outside of the schools. Similarly, my limited competence in English came from the informal and unstructured exposure to the language during my school years. Above all, my individual discomfort with all three languages indicates the entanglements of language education and the value attached to each language within a given socio-political context. This power relation shapes everyday linguistic exchanges, first, by creating unequal spaces of engagement for minoritized languages, and second, by making the power enjoyed by certain languages invisible. "Staying with" this discomfort, opened up new possibilities to explore language education as more than just apolitical pedagogical practice. Exploring "reflexivities of discomfort" (Pillow 2003) could both be a useful and critical heuristic tool "to produce relevant anthropological knowledge" (Giabiconi 2013: 199).

Language and Embodied Shaming

During the research I had to undergo many "tests" to prove my language competence. These tests show that the social relationships in the field are charged with a variety of power relations (Marcus 2005: 677). Since I had never "learnt" Nepal Bhasa formally, my pronunciation and vocabulary exposed my limited competence in the language. I often mixed English and Nepali words, my grammar was rustic, and I could not sustain a long conversation in Nepal Bhasa. While at the school in Kapilbastu, I had to confront other set of linguistic challenges. I had no competence in Tharu language. Though Tharu is close to Hindi, a language I am conversant in, it follows a different sentence and grammatical structure than Hindi. In the initial days of my fieldwork, I usually sat with one of the teachers or students who translated the conversations for me. While the arrangement helped me to understand the ongoing activities in the school, it made me aware of the ways in which language could act as a barrier not only in school education but also in social interactions and in the research process. The experience in Kapilvastu imparted an important lesson on the

difficulties faced by minority language speakers when languages other than their mother tongue is used for mainstream communication. More importantly, it also underscored the collaborative generation of linguistic knowledge, which is generally not acknowledged.

As I sought to improve my competence in Nepal Bhasa, people were frequently surprised that I could even speak the language. All the while, I was often told that my spoken Nepali did not have any Newar accent. To test my Nepal Bhasa competence, teachers and students playfully gave me short sentences to translate and commented on my speed, accent, pronunciation etc. I found this experience revealing in understanding an overarching assumption built into monolingualism in Nepal. Proficiency in languages, such as Nepali and English, is often perceived as a marker of certain class and educational disposition; as well as the "unlearning" of the other (mother) tongues. This monolingual assumption is shaped by twin forces of problematic history of mono-lingual educational policy that made Nepali language synonymous to national identity, and the new system that recognized linguistic diversity after 1990.[1] The interplay of this is evident in the language proficiency amongst different age groups in the Newar community. Study done by Gautam shows a drastic language shift from Nepal Bhasa to Nepali in the younger generation, mainly for the purpose of education and employment (Gautam 2021). The gradual shifts to dominant language have overwhelmingly shaped perception about monolingualism and the separation of different languages in their distinct spaces, with not much opportunity for boundary-crossing between languages.

The discussions in the JSB staffroom frequently identified accent as one of the common "problems" encountered by the Nepal Bhasa speakers. Teachers often mentioned instances when Nepali language speakers made fun of their accents. Having an accent, i.e., speaking with the phonology of another language, marked the identity of a speaker. As one of the teachers furiously remarked, "When I was in college my friends often laughed at me. They said that Newars couldn't differentiate between *ta* and *ta* [retroflex *t*]. They said eating buffalo meat made our tongue thicker." The quotidian mocking of accent, builds up embodied shame amongst many of the minority language speakers. Moreover, this indexing of languages – often termed as "markedness" – places languages in the hierarchical

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[1] Scholars note that there has been a gradual decline in the proportion of younger generations who speak their mother tongue (Turin 2013); as a result the intergenerational transfer of language is weakening (Pettigrew 2000).

structuring of difference. In Kapilbastu, where majority spoke at least two languages, they were not as much surprised by my ability to speak more than one language. Interestingly, the language activists and NGO staffs working on the mother-tongue education were reassured when I passed my "test" of being able to speak 'unaccented' Nepali, despite it not being my mother tongue. It is within this embodied language hierarchy – often manifested in the form of accent, pronunciation, and vocabulary – that the individuals are required to make their language choices. The concern over students' "accent" in Nepali language, in both Jagat Sundar and Jana Kalyan, illustrate how everyday linguistic inequalities can operate on different registers.

These fieldwork "encounters" with my mother tongue revealed the broader issues of "language ideology" within which the community of speakers make language choices. My discomfort with Nepal Bhasa was a product of the lack of an institutional training in the language I did not receive, as well as the strict boundary policing which regarded any crossings as signs of incompetence. Irvine (1989) describes how language and speech are not just about communication but also have a direct influence on the material world. Language competence or incompetence are "inextricably tied to the shifts in the political economy in which speech situations are located" (Urciuoli 1995: 530). My linguistic discomforts also demonstrate that such emotions are constructed within the broader context of everyday language hierarchies where individuals are rewarded or penalised based on their language use.

The teachers in JSB communicated with me in Nepal Bhasa despite my "imperfect" facility with the language. This meant I did not have to switch to Nepali during conversations, as it often happened elsewhere. Their conscious effort in encouraging a Newar to use Nepal Bhasa was evident in the way they dealt with my language competence. This aligns with the shifting discourse on Nepal Bhasa activism that encourages the use of the language, no matter how "imperfect" it is. There was a consensus amongst the teachers that allowing children to speak the language was more important than insisting on correct Nepal Bhasa usage. The teachers were particularly cognizant that given the shift to Nepali and English amongst the younger generation, they had to teach the language without making their students conscious of their relative lack of competence in the language. JSB and JKHSS teachers seemed keenly aware of the complex contexts in which language competence are negotiated, especially when the languages are not the mainstream ones. Both the schools tried to address language hierarchy

by teaching students different languages – mother tongue, Nepali, and English. My research experience shows that providing institutional space for languages that are otherwise only regarded as "private" opens up both "ideological and implementational spaces" (Hornberger 2005).

Epistemic Inequity and the Politics of Knowledge

Jagat Sundar Bwonekuthi (JSB) and Jana Kalyan Higher Secondary School (JKHSS), despite being mother-tongue schools, did not teach only Nepal Bhasa and Tharu. They also taught English and Nepali as compulsory languages, with hundred points allocated for each in every annual examination, as required by the national educational system. Competence in these languages – English and Nepali – is primarily developed through continuous training in schools. Competence is, therefore, perceived not simply as language-learning, but also as knowledge acquisition through formal education and is seemingly associated with being an "educated" person[2]. Within these contexts, the student experiences in these schools echoed that of many students from minoritized communities whose languages are evaluated through the deficit ideology. This ideology views the competence in the mother tongue inadequate for education and future employment prospects. My own school education reflected similar practice, where Nepali and English languages occupied positions in formal institutions whereas Nepal Bhasa was relegated to private spaces of home and community. Increasingly, this has generated a sense of loss, both personal and professional, regarding the possibilities that could have opened up if these languages were treated equally. As many researchers have noted, indigenous and minoritized languages are still invisible in the public space (Phyak and Ojha 2019). Other scholars have shown how Nepal's state policy towards minority languages has ranged from overt suppression (Gurung 1994) to "benign neglect" (Hutt 1986) and "unplanning" (Giri 2011)[3].

If the preponderance of Nepali and English use in the public space is often justified in terms of their "practical" and economic value, indigenous and minoritized languages are deemed marginal languages because of their perceived lack of practical and economic weight. This

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[2] As I have discussed elsewhere (Pradhan 2020), language has remained one of the key dynamics of state-making in Nepal, and until as late as the census of 1981, the term "literate" meant only those who could read and write in Nepali and/or in English.

[3] It was through Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC) of 1956 that the government of Nepal adopted pro-active national language policies in schools. The NNEPC stated that "to solve the problems of multiplicity of language, stress and importance will have to lay on one language, if the integrity and sovereignty of Nepal is to be maintained" (NNEPC 1956: 63)

"deficit ideology" results in inadequate investment of time, resources and effort made in the teaching and learning of minoritized languages. Consequently, labelling these languages as marginal renders them unsuitable for formal learning. This cycle of perceived value, inadequate institutional investment, and the invisibility of languages in public space are indicative of the ways in which everyday language practices operate within existing power relations. In Nepal, marked by deeply entrenched social hierarchies, meaningful commitment to multilingualism cannot ignore the inequalities within which everyday language exchanges are embedded. As the scholarship on language acquisition shows, competence in any given language is not a natural phenomenon. Time, effort, and resources determine the outcomes of that process in both formal and informal educational spaces. It is through consistent training and exposure that one acquires different levels of proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing. I realised this fact as I reflected on my competence in different languages. On the resource issue, JSB and JKHSS receive significantly less funding for Nepal Bhasa and Dangaura Tharu instructions, compared to Nepali or English. The latter two languages also have an enviable position of being compulsory subjects in school education. The hierarchy of languages thus create different spaces and perception for the minoritized languages. These disparities need to be acknowledged and addressed if multilingualism is not to be merely limited to the right to speak different languages.

The scholars of multilingualism, especially from the Global South, have drawn attention to similar "inequalities of multilingualism" (Tupas 2014). While multilingualism may be present in the Global South, in actuality different languages are accorded different positions in the language hierarchy and not all of them have same visibility in public spaces (Heugh 2021: 7). Given this reality, even when people may have formal right to speak different languages, the social and political status accorded to languages can be severely hindered by the material conditions impacting those languages differently. In Nepal, despite the constitutional guarantee of the primary education in the mother tongue as a fundamental right, Jagat Sundar Bwonekuthi (JSB) and Jana Kalyan Higher Secondary School (JKHSS) belong to a very small group of schools in Nepal that teach in languages other than Nepali and English.[4]

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[4] Though this might be changing as local governments have been providing spaces for languages that were otherwise conspicuous by their absence (Rai 2021).

My academic biography is a testament to the language (in)competence acquired in one such unequal multilingualism. While I learnt English throughout my school education, my language (in)competence evolved through haphazard use of English language training during school education in Nepal. Scholars of second language acquisition often recommend that English language competence is better acquired by introducing it in the later stages through suitable pedagogical techniques. Contrary to this, school education policy in Nepal continues to push for the use of English from early grade onwards, and especially in STEM subjects (Phyak 2021; Sah 2021). English language is, for instance, compulsory throughout the ten to twelve years of school education. English is a mandatory subject and students sit for hundred-mark exams every year. Many private schools require "Extra English" as an additional subject to attract more students and broadcast 'quality' that often allows them to distinguish them from public schools (Pradhan 2020). The "English-medium obsession" in school education does not match the qualification of the teachers and/or the quality of teaching-learning. This results in a significant teaching-learning gap in English education. At the same time, since the knowledge of English language is primarily acquired through formal education, it has become synonymous with being "educated". In this, English language becomes "emblematic of [the] social, political, intellectual of moral character" (Woolard 1998: 18) of the speaker.

Such privileged institutionalised space accorded to the mainstream languages, such as English, further limits the "utility" of minoritized languages. Though I learned Nepali language during my school education and in the early stages of my higher education in Nepal, I have never published any academic work in Nepali language. Moreover, the higher educational sector in Nepal as elsewhere is dominated by English language. As one moves into higher education, one is expected to be proficient in various registers of academic English. With the growing global trend and pressure to publish in English language, the already existing epistemic linguistic inequality has been institutionalised on a global scale. The prevailing structure of knowledge production in the university system requires an individual to constantly perfect academic English, and seek English language support in case of deficiency to meet certain publishing standards. In recent years, scholars of language education have referred to this as epistemicide (Grosfoguel 2013), wherein the apparent hierarchy of knowledge shapes how languages are allotted space in the public sphere. This "geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo 2008) shapes the imageries of competence that positions different languages in a set hierarchy.

Navigating (In)competence

It is within these local and global hierarchies of languages that we need to rethink the idea of language competence vs incompetence. Language competence discourse often focuses on upholding the linguistic integrity and hierarchy rather than seeing how language/s may help the learner develop an understanding on an issue and to access knowledge. It thus privileges language over the learners, and any boundary-crossings between different languages are understood as language incompetence. Linguistic anthropology of education defines this process as the socialisation through language, which requires one to use language in "socially appropriate" ways (Rymes 2008; Ochs and Schieffelin 2000). This paradigm has had an important role in restricting the use of "home" languages in schools. Such way of thinking about language incompetence overlooks learners in multilingual contexts as emergent bi-lingual speakers who can often draw on their integrated linguistic repertoire (Garcia 2009). Instead, the dominant language competence model perceives such practices through the lens of "deficit ideology" (Gorksi 2011) whereby language learners are marked negatively for mixing languages. This conceptualisation of language as a rigidly structured form neglects linguistic practices that often accompany communication in multilingual contexts (Canagarajah 2007).

However, if we pay attention to informal learning contexts, teachers and students often ignore language norms and use languages flexibly to understand and build conceptual knowledge. These instances of informal language usage mark emerging literary skills and personal intellectual activity of students as they aspire to gain competence in the formal language. Students and teachers in JSB and JKHSS use multiple languages in everyday classroom exchanges, often transgressing language rules and language boundaries. In one of the classes I observed, as the teacher entered the classroom, the students stood up to greet the teacher in English: *"Good morning, mam"*. As the teacher progressed through the lesson, she asked two students in Nepali: "*timiharu dui jana first benchma basna au"* (You two come and sit on the front desk). In response, one of student asked in Nepal Bhasa laced with English words "*Mam, homework likayegu kha*?" (Shall we take our homework out?). During my research observations, such instances of multi-lingual interactions were frequent. In all these everyday exchanges, students and teachers alike used a mix of different languages to communicate. Reflecting back to my own multi-lingual identity, most of my language use often includes a

varied and mixed use of different languages. When I make academic presentations in Nepali, I tend to use English words. I mix Nepali words when I speak Nepal Bhasa.

Sociolinguistic research refers to these flexible language practices as translanguaging – a process of making meaning, shaping experience, and gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two or more languages (Garcia 2009; Cresse and Blackledge 2010). Despite how common these translanguaging practices are, especially in multilingual contexts, it is often overlooked while favouring the dominant linguistic rules that operate within hierarchies of language. Instead of romanticizing the ideals of linguistic integrity or the importance of single universal language as a marker of competence, the everyday linguistic practice in multilingual milieu of Nepal, allows us to appreciate how multilingual speakers actually learn. If we were to centre the quotidian experiences of the language speakers and their learning process, rather than prioritising language structures, we may be able to look beyond the "common sense knowledge" established within the existing language hierarchies.

The presence of JSB and JKHSS, despite a very small number of such schools offering mother-tongue education, enable indigenous languages to be utilised in the institutional settings. This can shift the ways in which the idea of an "educated person" is imagined in Nepal and can alter the characteristics of Nepali public spaces. Indigenous language education can help reclaim indigenous knowledge and vernacular worldviews. For example, when the teachers used the words *Yanya Punh* in JSB, a festival celebrated by the Newar community, it opened up opportunities to discuss the historical and cultural importance of the festival. In such contexts, the "language work" (Leonard 2017) can transform public space. This could, in turn, push the boundaries of knowledge-making for the minoritized communities. In the midst of unequal multilingualism, scholars have urged us to think beyond the neoliberal logic of language education that views language competence through a narrow lens of careerism (McCarty, Nicholas and Wigglesworth. 2019).

Mainstream linguistic rules render certain linguistic practices uncomfortable. I frequently feel extreme discomfort in my inability to adhere to grammatical rules, appearance of my "accent", or translanguaging practices. This discomfort, as I have discussed in this article is a product of myriad socio-historic forces. First, there is differential and unequal training available for different languages. Second, the perceived value of different languages positions them on a descending scale of importance. Third, practice that privileges the integrity of

language over the learners renders boundary crossing as transgressive. But, the variety of discursive practices utilised in schools, such as JSB and JKHSS, challenge the homogenising impulses of mainstream education in order to negotiate the legitimacy of minority languages in education. The focus here is not on language but on the people who might draw on different languages in their everyday multilingual discursive practices.

Conclusion

This article draws on my uncomfortable encounters with different languages during research on language education to explore the issue of unequal multilingualism in Nepal. Using biographical experiences and ethnographic vignettes from two mother tongue schools, this paper argues that the personal discomfort with language competence needs to be situated within broader socio-political context of language hierarchy. It calls on to pay attention to both material and political conditions that value languages differently and regard competence in minoritized languages as not useful for the market. The matrix of power and unequal resources shapes language education in two distinct ways. First, as individuals navigate unequal multilingualism, they are expected to both navigate multiple languages as well as the language inequalities. Second, despite the unequal institutional support for different languages, they are nevertheless expected to develop competence in all languages equally.

Even while operating within the context of the dominant system, mother tongue education schools, such as JSB and JKHS, provide creative spaces to re-think the issues of language (in)competence. The use of Nepal Bhasa and Dangaura Tharu in these schools are considerably a small initiative that do not necessarily reverse existing language hierarchies. Nonetheless, the presence of these schools and their insistence on using minority languages enables them to generate spaces for the language that are otherwise rendered invisible in the mainstream milieu. The "use" of minoritized language in schools should not be informed by the market logic or the socio-economic value of the language. Rather, it needs to be valued for the spaces it opens up for the minoritized groups to use a range of linguistic repertoire in their educational endeavours, as they seek to reclaim varieties of worldviews and push the boundaries of possibility for the minoritized communities.

The "imperfect" Nepal Bhasa that I spoke during my fieldwork in JSB or the "accent" in JSB students' pronunciation thus need not be viewed as language incompetence. Instead, those are linguistic positions within the plural and fractured space of unequal multilingualism.

Multilingual speakers may use a variety of linguistic and semiotic practices as they move through their language learning journey. If we can appreciate them not as an incompetence but as a way to expand possibilities within existing language hierarchies, it may offer us new conceptual tools to view language as a way to gain and shift the loci of knowledge production. Understood that way, "staying with" the discomfort may reveal the existing relationships of power and inequity, thereby making it possible to appreciate the fragmented ways in which people seek their place within the spaces of unequal multilingualism.

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