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The Language Movement *in* Bangladesh

The What and the Why?

> I don't know if there has been any other political symbol as powerful as the Shaheed Minar in the history of the Bengali nation. The Language Movement and the Shaheed Minar both highlight a truth—that language itself is a political arena. What arises in this field of language must be inherently political and must emerge from within society itself if language is to be truly liberated.
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> —Faruk Wasif, "Why Bow Down, O Shaheed Minar?"

Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about language have been foundational to academic understandings of this most innate and essential human characteristic. He argued for thinking about languages as both *langue*, an idea about a language of a speech community defined by a system of rules, and as *parole*, the actual practices of individuals in that speech community (de Saussure 1966). Theorization around languages has had to balance this dual function ever since. Structuralist and Chomskian linguistics highlight languages as a system of rules and an idea located in the mind (i.e., the langue sense) and see its connections to context and actual use as secondary. On the other end, situationist approaches generally view the utterance, not the sentence, as the fundamental unit of language (taking their cue from Michael Bakhtin). These approaches emphasize how all language occurs in dialogue within contexts, embedded in what is said before and what comes afterward (i.e., the parole sense).

Pedagogical approaches to languages and communication in rhetoric and writing studies parallel these framings, and, consequently, prioritize one

over the other. Current traditional rhetorics stress a sense of communication around competence of forms and modes, seeing differences as errors to be corrected. By contrast, process (and postprocess) approaches have focused on teaching communication through a series of steps that can situate meaning-making, viewing errors not as failures of competence but differences in communicative practices (Berlin 1987). The distinction between these two approaches demonstrates the abiding influence of dualist thinking about languages: What do we mean when we talk about languages? Do we mean the language as an idea or the language as a practice? What does it mean when we prioritize one over the other? How might we talk about languages in ways that recognize both these senses?

This ambivalence is also evident in a consequential exchange during the 1948 Pakistani Constituent Assembly. The exchange was part of an event now known as the state language debate and a struggle for rhetorical sovereignty today called the Language Movement in Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, one of the two geographically separate parts (or "wings") of newly independent Pakistan. During the first session of the 1948 assembly in newly independent Pakistan, Dhirendranath Datta, a representative from East Pakistan, tabled a motion for adopting Bangla, the language spoken by the Bengalis, as an official language. He framed his proposal by listing the practical challenges Bengalis faced with government documents not in their mother tongue, providing an example of a villager who does not understand the value of stamp papers used for contracts or sale deeds written in English or Urdu. Consequently, Datta argued, the assembly—responsible for drafting the constitution of the new nation—should signal that no language spoken by its people would be out of place in Pakistan. His amendment articulated the practice of linguistic pluralism and specifically would have allowed the use of Bangla (the language spoken by most of the population) alongside English and Urdu in the assembly so that "Bangla should not be treated as a Provincial Language. It should be treated as the language of the State" (Al-Helal 2016, 232).

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, leader of the majority party, the Muslim League, reacted negatively to Datta's motion. He said that while he had initially thought the proposal was "an innocent one" that made space for the different languages spoken by the country's people, he now believed that Datta's "waxed eloquence stated that Bangla should really be the lingua franca of Pakistan." Asserting his position as leader of the parliament, Khan declared that he would not support the amendment and that "Pakistan is a Muslim country, so the language of the Muslim nation should be the language of the country."

The language of the Muslim nation he was talking about was Urdu, which was incongruous, demographically speaking, as it was the primary language of only 3 percent of the population; the diverse people comprising Pakistan spoke dozens of languages, with Bangla—the mother tongue of 56 percent—representing the speech of the majority (Van Schendel 2020). Datta, responding to the Prime Minister, tried to clarify that removing Urdu's centrality to the nation of Pakistan "was not the intention," but Khan would no longer broach further discussion. Speaking as majority leader, he said that the assembly would not support Datta's amendment or "such a kind of amendment if ever it comes forward in the future" (Al-Helal 2016, 232–34). The motion did not advance.

I find this exchange expressive of one consequence of the dual nature of language and how it overlaps with communicative norms and national identity in the subcontinent. Their disagreement foregrounds language as a consequential rhetorical common topic, or *topoi*, in shaping identity and political unity during a transitional moment from a colonial order to a postcolonial one. Datta's proposal to the assembly was, on its face, to recognize the plurilingual norms of subcontinental culture in its procedural practices, yet Khan's response centered its potential consequences for the idea of Pakistan. Khan did not think that the newly independent nation could effectively integrate its various cultures and languages without one national language and the idea such a linguistic regime afforded. Urdu, he believed, would foster the unity of Pakistan as one nation. He did not believe Bangla was suitably Islamic; moreover, it was too closely associated with Bengalis. The tension between the speakers reflected wider social issues between different ethnic and speech communities, as well as distinct language ideologies, extant in the newly independent country. The disagreement illustrates the tension between the idea of languages as such and linguistic identities as connected to specific populations (i.e., Bangla being the language of Bengalis).

The difference also highlights one way that ideas about languages connect to and become stand-ins for underlying social and political issues. It addressed, as Willem Van Schendel writes more broadly, "a confrontation between Pakistan's two wings over issues such as language, autonomy, food security, and economics" (2013, 179). Khan's belief that treating Bangla as a state language would jeopardize cohesion in Pakistan voiced the pervasive anxiety over Indian (specifically Hindu) influence. He was convinced that Pakistan—a model of Islamic modernity, as conceived by Pakistani nationalists—needed to have a single language to distinguish the "experimental

Islamic nation" from its non-Islamic, multilingual neighbor (Van Schendel 2013, 179). He feared that legitimizing Bangla as one of the state languages would destabilize the new nation by opening the door to Indian influence; their adversary stretched between the two wings of Pakistan, and the people of West Bengal (in India) shared a common language, border, and culture with the Bengalis of East Pakistan. Khan's views also undoubtedly reflected the prejudices of Pakistan's ruling class, which viewed Bengali Muslims as "socially inferior . . . and they could not be fully-fledged Pakistanis unless they shed much of their Bengaliness" (Van Schendel 2013, 180).

Yet this was only the beginning of the story. The ensuing debate would have profound consequences for the nation of Pakistan and the geopolitical map of the subcontinent. Specifically, the Language Movement, a social movement demanding state language recognition of Bangla—the mother language of the Bengali people—would emerge and find its totemic symbol in the killing of protesters on February 21, 1952. This movement laid bare how arguments of a people's political and social rights can be articulated over the topoi of language, one that illustrates its kairotic affordance, aligning arguments with the moment and scene alongside other communicative resources and practices emerging out of a rapidly developing rhetorical situation.

Demands for recognizing Bangla became the vehicle through which the disenfranchised population of East Pakistan turned "political grievances into a popular resistance forcing the Pakistan state to change its policies" (Van Schendel 2013, 181). They organized around demands for state language recognition, and after 1952 triumphed over the central government's position of promoting Urdu as the sole lingua franca. It was a struggle for rhetorical sovereignty, the inherent right of people to "decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (Lyons 2000, 450), within the political deliberations of Pakistani nationalism. It took place in academic and policy spaces, alongside political mobilization and public protests. It made use of the different ways people in the province practiced language and communication while demonstrating the way language can speak for a community. The movement drove a fundamental reorganization of political order in East Pakistan and Pakistani society overall and seeded a national consciousness in the Bengali population of the country that would culminate in Bangladeshi Independence in 1971.

In this sense, I provide an examination of the state language debate and especially the Language Movement in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Its rhetorics enacted a deliberation around languages—as codes or forms of

speech practices or fluid repertoires—as being situated, dynamic semiotic resources for communication, identification, and meaning-making. I argue that the movement provides a generative example of how such practices affect societal transformation. It highlights a mass movement wherein "people grappled with questions of language: what it is; how it functions in spheres such as civics, education, and religion" (Kimball 2021, 7). It also illustrates, in situ, a sense of translingual rhetorics as the use of "linguistic resources to persuade, instruct, or express" (Fahim et al. 2023, 94) alongside multimodal repertoires at a social scale.

The Language Movement did argue for a stable sense of Bangla, a discrete code that was representative of a community, in its rhetorics of state language recognition. Yet my analysis suggests we also might productively interpret this idea of the langue as a kairotic affordance for advocating linguistic justice and pluralistic ends. This reading demonstrates how such a conceptualization of language, when strategically deployed, can function alongside diverse linguistic practices of everyday communication. Thus, it calls for a nuanced sense of its dual nature as a translingualist takeaway, one observant of "general openness to plurality and difference in the ways people use language" (Lee and Jenks 2016, 317).

The Language Movement in Bangladesh: Translingualism and a Struggle for Rhetorical Sovereignty makes the case for always seeing languages as an idea and a form of practice. While the dominance of structuralist approaches to languages—viewing languages as codes or ideas—has been hugely generative, it has also created a common sense that has been operationalized for marginalizing "non-standard practices" (Lee and Jenks 2016, 320). Critical theorizations of languages emerged to correct inequities hidden in the structuralist framings of languages by highlighting the norm of difference in communicative practices as part of a larger project of social justice (Smitherman 1999).

Theorizations grounded in these critical approaches are also coming under scrutiny. Some scholars have pointed out that considering communication predicated on fluidity to be inherent in all linguistic practices fails to account for the sedimented senses of how languages animate practices and risks both perpetuating a "sameness-as-difference model" (Gilyard 2016, 286) and collapsing into a kind of relativism. These approaches can obviate the need to recognize how sociopolitical situations shape ideologies around languages and how differences turn into inequality—at the worst, critics argue, perpetuating white supremacy (Conference on College Composition and Communication 2020), colonialist thinking (Cushman 2016), and neoliberal commodification (Kubota 2016).