Multilingualism in Language Learning:
Mapping the Theoretical Landscape

Vasumathi Badrinathan*

Abstract

India is by far one of the most multilingual countries in the world. It is therefore only logical that policies and official documents on education in India recognise and insist upon the importance of multilingualism in different ways. However, the reality of the classroom is very different. This present study is an enquiry into multilingualism in education, with a focus on language learning in India. Building upon earlier research on the subject in the context of foreign language learning (French), this study attempts to further problematize and contextualize multilingualism in language teaching and learning for adults in India. Languages and foreign languages (here, French) are most often taught and learnt via English or, in some instances, the language itself, with little involvement or pedagogical know-how on integrating the language repertoires of learners. In such a scenario, the learning-teaching paradigm is more often than not tilted towards a bilingual approach (target language & English) or a monolingual approach (target language only). To recognise and integrate multilingual practices, a theoretically grounded understanding of multilingualism is recommended. Based on these reflections, A paradigm of Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism (CMPL) is proposed, which aims at making informed methodological and pedagogical choices that harness the linguistic, cultural resources and knowledge systems embedded within the many different languages present in the class. This will go a long way in rethinking the didactic framework of language learning and teaching, and re-examining multilingualism. It is not just a functional move directed towards developing measurable multilingual competencies, but also as a tool for engaging with language as a humanising, intercultural resource.

Keywords: Multilingualism, India, language learning, conceptual framework, Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism, linguistic repertoire

Introduction

Multilingualism, the ability to use and navigate multiple languages, is an increasingly prominent phenomenon in today's interconnected and globalised world. Far from being an exception, it has become the norm, particularly in postcolonial, migratory, and transnational contexts. Traditionally understood as the simple coexistence of distinct linguistic codes within an individual or community, multilingualism is now theorised as a dynamic and fluid practice shaped by complex sociocultural, cognitive, and political dimensions. This paradigm shift invites scholars to move beyond static notions of language proficiency toward more nuanced understandings of how languages intersect, overlap, and are deployed strategically in various domains of life.

Contemporary research foregrounds multilingualism not only as a communicative repertoire but also as a site of identity negotiation, social positioning, and power relations. The growing focus on translanguaging, code-switching, and hybrid language practices challenges monolingual ideologies that have historically dominated linguistic theory and language policy. In this light, multilingualism is not merely a linguistic fact but also a socio-political construct that reflects broader questions of access, inclusion, and identity.

This article seeks to examine the theoretical underpinnings of multilingualism from sociolinguistic perspectives. It aims to explore how multilingualism is conceptualised, the policies and frameworks used to

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* Professor, Department of French Studies, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.
Can be reached at vasumathi.badrinathan@bhu.ac.in

study it, and the implications such perspectives hold for language learning with particular reference to the Indian context. By situating multilingualism within broader theoretical debates, this article contributes to a more holistic understanding of language use and language learning in contemporary society - one that recognises complexity, fluidity, and plurality as central to linguistic life.

Problematizing Multilingualism - From Language Knowledge to Language Use

In the light of increased mobility and rapidly transforming societies, multilingualism is a global phenomenon. So much so that multilingualism, both societal and individual, is currently a norm in most parts of the world (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020), propelling the famous "multilingual turn in language education" (May, 2014). There is a certain normalcy about being multilingual, as it is spontaneous and natural for man to negotiate more than one language. So much so that multilingual abilities, though a part of people's capacities, were not specifically highlighted (Braunmuller & Ferraresi, 2003). Explicit language policies came into existence only in the modern day. The pattern in the past relied on fluidity, communication, and pragmatism, with partial or full command over a language. Many studies and conceptual frameworks of multilingualism stem from contexts of migration and identity (Pavlenko et al, 2004), colonisation and minority language contexts (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), where the challenges of language loss and learning of new languages, exclusion, and stereotyping form the crux of enquiry. For example, authors have focused on different contexts of multilingual education (Mehisto, 2015, public schooling in Estonia), multilingualism against the backdrop of growing immigration (Hutz, 2023, in Germany), Iezzi, 2024, on the Italian context). Similar studies from the Dutch context have emerged (Duarte & van der Meij, 2018).

The Asian context of multilingualism is a different study representing different parameters for study, which are quite different from the European or the American contexts (Leconte, Badrinathan, & Forlot, 2018). Within the Asian territory, India is a case in itself. With a staggering number of indigenous languages against the backdrop of English as a major player, India is a context with a complex multilingual structure like none other. The sheer scale of linguistic populations in India indicates that multilingualism is not a marginal but a mainstream reality. In contrast to the modern notion of multilingualism shaped by migration (as in Europe or North America), Asia's multilingualism is usually endogenous, growing organically (Pandit, 1972) within regions and communities

over centuries. Colonial legacies created linguistic stratification that compounded language problems, creating a divide between prestige languages and other languages of use. Accent neutralisation workshops, mother tongue influence, are concepts gaining currency in contemporary India, indirectly delegitimising local and regional languages in favour of the lingua franca, English. The media also contributes in a fair measure to language inequalities. Films have traditionally mocked South Indian languages and accents, for example. If multilingualism has to be implemented, we need to begin by de-ostracising languages socially, appreciating the languages we possess and dissolving false binaries between languages.

This context deserves closer attention to the spectrum of language learning and a conceptual framework informed by its sociocultural, sociopolitical and linguistic specificities (Badrinathan & Leconte, 2018; Agnihotri, 2007, 2014; Mishra & Mahanand, 2017). How can multilingualism shape language learning and teaching? Essentially, the approach to language learning needs to shift from an additive conception, that is, the linear, additive mechanism of stacking languages, one after the other, in order of hierarchy based on their social and academic importance. Second, languages themselves become a tool for learning languages within the multilingual framework. In other words, the linguistic repertoire must be harnessed to serve as a resource for language teaching. The concept of linguistic repertoire refers to the full range of language varieties, styles, registers, and communicative resources that an individual or community draws upon in different social contexts. The term moves beyond the idea of discrete, bounded languages to emphasise how speakers flexibly and strategically mobilise their language skills based on situational demands. In multilingual settings, linguistic repertoires are not simply a collection of linguistic codes, but also a reflection of one's social history and access to communicative resources (Blommaert, Backus, 2011). Understanding linguistic repertoires is, therefore, crucial in recognising the complexity of language use in real life and in designing inclusive language policies and pedagogies (Castellotti & Moore, 2010).

What the Policies Say

High levels of societal multilingualism and rising academic discourse have impacted official language policies. The national educational policies in India have made allowances for language use through the well-recognised three-language formula. This, however, has often led to an asymmetrical multilingualism, where only some languages are recognised or valued officially,

despite widespread linguistic diversity. This is the case of English or dominant regional languages that push into oblivion minority languages (cf. Mohanty's 'double divide' (2010).

While the formula has worked in some instances and far less in others, it goes without saying that it is a clear call for making space for languages. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) explicitly draws attention to "multilingualism and the power of language", as did the previous national educational policies (1968,1986), although in different terms. Attention has been given largely to language learning and mother tongue education. "Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue / local language / regional language. Thereafter, the home / local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible" (p.13). This, however, leans towards a perspective of additive multilingualism, which in itself supports language learning, but does not show the 'how' of multilingual learning, which is understandable, given that the NEP 2020 is a broad framework. The more specific National Curricular Framework (NCERT, NCF, 2005, 2022) makes a better case for multilingualism. It rightfully views multilingualism as "a resource, a classroom strategy and goal by a creative language teacher" (2005, p. 53), "promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning" (2022, p.33). The Position Paper of the National Focus Group on languages goes even further. It draws attention to "a repertoire of multiple registers to negotiate a variety of social encounters" (NCERT, NFG, 2006, p. 7) and recommends "utilising the multiplicity of languages available in the classroom" (p. 23). The document also recognises the role of all agents in the multilingual process of education. "What is critical is that curriculum makers, textbook writers, teachers, and parents start appreciating the importance of multilingualism, which sensitises the child to the cultural and linguistic diversity around her and encourages her to use it as a resource for her development" (p.16). Both the NCF and the NFG papers give a clear orientation to recognising and utilising multilingual resources present in the classroom, much in alignment with the influential and defining guidelines of the Common European Framework of Languages (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001). The CEFR speaks about plurilingual and pluricultural competence as fundamentals of multilingual practices. The authors define this competence **"**not a superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw**"** (Council of Europe, 2001, p.168). We refer, not anymore to compartmentalised competences but to a 'composite' competence which draws from the range of multilingual capacities of the speaker. Significantly, the CEFR shatters the notion of claiming languages on the basis of perfection. As the document explains, "plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages in varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.168).

The CEFR set up, therefore, a distinctive paradigm of non-linear, non-additive multilingualism- one that relies on languages present, as an asset, as a resource, rather than a liability. In such a framework, one looks at multilingualism or the multilingual speaker as not two or more languages co-existing with each other, or being two times monolingual (Grosjean, 1989), but rather as a single and a singular unit provided by knowledge of languages, even if learnt imperfectly. In multilingual India, this point of reference is valuable, as it shifts the perspective towards the language resources and strengths that one has, rather than what one does not. These ideologies have certain theoretical underpinnings that may be interesting to review.

A Framework of Complexity for Language Learning

The theory of complexity, developed by French sociologist, philosopher and thinker Edgar Morin, proposes a holistic and transdisciplinary perspective on knowledge. It challenges the simplistic, straight-jacketed framework, inherited from the Cartesian traditions. Instead, it proposes an optic that is capable of connecting and contextualising knowledge.

Morin defines complex thought in education by inviting us to recognise the complexity and interconnectedness of all learning. "Not only is the part in the whole, but the whole is in the part" (Morin, 2008, p. 27), he explains. This integrality is fundamental to appropriating any knowledge, as he explicitly posits. "The predominance of fragmented learning (…) makes us unable to connect parts and wholes; it should be replaced by learning that can grasp subjects within their context, their complexity, their totality." (Morin, 1999, p. 9). Morin also reminds us that all education, and that presupposes language education, is a humanistic act. "The human condition should be an essential subject of all education" (Morin, 1999, p.10), he insists. And again, "Understanding each other (..) both a means and an end of human communication" (p.10). This is the very base of intercultural education and intercultural competence, which is a cornerstone of contemporary language studies (Castelloti et al., 2024).

In the field of language studies, the theory of complexity proposes an alternative paradigm. Far from a monolithic, monolingual thought process, favouring one or the other language and thereby, by default, the dominant culture, complexity invites us to rethink the framework of language learning. It allows us to bypass the linear, grammar-based model and move towards an inclusive communicative model, in keeping with the specificities of the context. As Kramsch says, "complexity theory enables us to avoid decontextualising, idealising segregating" (2012, p. 15) and to find a holistic approach to language learning and teaching.

In a language class, Morin's complexity framework and the centrality of interconnectedness invite us to rethink learning, marking the importance of interdisciplinary, reflexive, contextualised pedagogies. It allows for a multilingual, multicultural framework wherein the complexities of the linguistic identity of the learner are recognised and acknowledged. Learning a language is learning to be "the other", of engaging with alterity, otherness and interculturality. This finds direct reference to the learner-centred pedagogies of the modern day. from a perspective of connecting, rather than isolating.

The theory of complexity allows us to reckon with the agency and affordances of languages as an interconnected mesh, relating to society, culture, emotions and identity, thereby establishing an entire network of ecology of learning. This perspective thereby averts the structuralist view of learners being hosts to a language rather than active agents (Kroskrity, 2004) and situates language learning in a process of identity.

Translanguaging: Theory, Approach, Pedagogy

Related to complex thought, is the theory of translanguaging that Vogel and García (2017, p.1) define as a "theory (which) posits that rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts".

Translanguaging occurs when all linguistic, cognitive and cultural resources from languages at the disposal of learners/speakers are summoned to communicate and to make sense of the world. The translanguaging theory posits that "rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts." (Vogel &

Garcia, 2017, p.1). While code-switching is a linguistic practice used by speakers, translanguaging has evolved into a pedagogy and can be meaningfully inserted into instructional strategies (Spyridonos et al, 2023). It highlights the fluidity of languages and makes a case for a non-monolithic learning of languages, which is particularly important for foreign language learning.

In the classroom, this may involve bilingual group work, using home languages for brainstorming before writing in the target language, or analysing texts in one language and responding in another. These activities promote active engagement and reduce anxiety by allowing learners to use all their linguistic resources rather than suppressing them. Furthermore, multilingual classrooms can benefit from language comparison activities, such as examining how different languages express time, politeness, or emotion. Such strategies not only reinforce linguistic concepts but also promote intercultural competence and linguistic identity, and simultaneously help learners become aware of cultural norms embedded in language use. As Wei (2018, p.12) further explains, "translanguaging empowers both the learner and the teacher, transforms the power relations, and focuses the process of teaching and learning on making meaning, enhancing experience, and developing identity". The above theoretical paradigms will well serve to "emancipate the language learner" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012) from a restricted, process of language learning, into a comprehensive, inclusive learning, where equity, democratic approach and inclusivity are called upon.

Taking Lessons from the Roots

Far from being an exception, written multilingualism was the norm in several historical and religious contexts in India. For instance, Grantham, a hybrid script combining Tamil and Sanskrit, was traditionally used for religious texts and scholarly treatises. Similarly, Manipravalam - a blend of Sanskrit, Malayalam, and elements of Tamil- was widely employed in classical literary and liturgical compositions.

Contemporary linguistic practices in India continue this legacy in spoken traditions. In regions such as Karnataka, multilingual speakers often display fluency in Tulu, Konkani, and Kannada, moving fluidly between these languages based on context. The 'Palghat Tamil' spoken in parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu illustrates a seamless hybridity of Tamil and Malayalam, with speakers proudly asserting their unique linguistic identity. Likewise, in Dharwad, the local variety of Marathi bears significant influence from Kannada language and culture. These examples reflect a functional and organic multilingualism in which different languages serve distinct purposes, such

as ritual, domestic communication, or public interaction. This context-sensitive multilingualism demonstrates not confusion but a sophisticated interplay of languages, each valued for its domain-specific utility and cultural resonance.

Terminological Turmoil

One must take cognisance of the terminological differences we encounter. The Anglo-Saxon world normally uses the term 'multilingualism' to represent both societal and individual levels. The francophone world of scholarship has preferred the use of multilingualism for the societal phenomenon and plurilingualism to represent the individual level. However, the CEFR speaks not just about multilingualism but also evokes the notion of plurilingual competence. The word 'pluri' represents and encompasses a more complex network, which Piccardo (2018, p. 7) highlights. "A multilingual classroom is a classroom in which there are children who speak different mother tongues. A Plurilingual classroom is one in which teachers and students pursue an educational strategy of embracing and exploiting the linguistic diversity present to maximise communication and hence both subject learning and plurilingual/pluricultural awareness."

However, the differences are far from resolved and not all applied linguists have adopted this distinction; many have attached to 'multilingualism', adjectives like 'dynamic,' 'holistic,' 'inclusive,' 'active' or 'integrated' to try and capture the plurilingualism concept" (CEFR Expert Group, 2023, p. 23).

Towards the didactics of multi-plurilingualism

When it comes to language education, often, policy has lagged behind practice. However, in the Indian context, the reverse is also true. If policies make a space for multilingualism and generate a discourse around it, it does not necessarily reflect in language learning practices. If it is vital to recognise, acknowledge and harness the linguistic repertoire of learners present in class, it is also equally challenging to implement it. How does one teach multilingually and practically apply this approach (Vetter & Slavkov, 2022)? If language learning calls for an informed approach to multilingual practices, foreign language pedagogy for adults calls for a framework of learning of its own. Such a pedagogy necessarily implies some fundamental changes in beliefs and approach to languages.

There are undoubtedly challenges to the implementation of such an approach. Languages as identity markers contribute to an ideological overload (Francescini, 2013) and a social pressure, leading to many home languages being sidelined, marginalised or rendered obsolete. It is also undeniable that the native speaker ideal persists. An earlier study on French language teachers (Badrinathan, 2018, 2021) reveals that in their idealization of the native speaker, the language teacher becomes hostage to an imagined ideal norm. This becomes an impediment to recognising the linguistic repertoire of learners. Language deficiencies of learners are viewed as defects rather than as an asset for language learning, thereby aggravating linguistic vulnerabilities (Badrinathan, 2020).

In Indian classrooms, languages other than English are used fundamentally to explain concepts and make them comprehensible, or to offer explanations when English is not widely understood. Besides, teachers feel that using other languages is not legitimate in a foreign language classroom (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018; Badrinathan, 2018, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that teachers feel guilty about using languages other than English or the target language in the classroom. This also reveals a fundamental "monolingual habitus" (Gogolin, 1997) - that of favouring one dominant language and marginalising multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, in a foreign language classroom, bringing in the use of languages other than the target language or the dominant language, i.e., English, plays an important role. It challenges the notion of target language as the only medium of instruction, creating an affective environment that is congenial for learning. They appeal to the linguistic identity of learners while fostering intracultural and intercultural understanding through this process. For example, at the Banaras Hindu University, at the author's current institution, the author began experimenting with Hindi when French as a medium of instruction did not have the desired results, essentially because of learners' inadequate target language skills. So, teaching Voltaire, embedded with French and Hindi and infrequently English, not only enabled better understanding but created an atmosphere of confidence, where learners participated in analysis, and made an effort to produce the same in French too. The wisdom in *Candide*, the studied text, was often interpreted through the filter of Hindi, with comparisons to Indian texts, proverbs, and wisdom. This translingual engagement did not dilute the learning; rather, it deepened it, affirming that meaning is most powerfully constructed when learners can think across languages.

Towards a paradigm of Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism (CMPL)

It does not suffice to market multilingualism and to merely enshrine it in policies. It is not even enough to recognise that many languages co-exist. What is vital is

to understand the value of multilingualism in learning, especially in language learning and implement it rightly in the classroom. To achieve that, this article posits the concept of a Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism (CMPL). Firstly, Conscious Multi-Pluril-Lingualism arises from clear, unambiguous and conscious choices in the language classroom. It consciously considers linguistic repertoires of learners, using tools from translanguaging, appreciating linguistic and cultural capital, enabling code-mixing, comparing languages, fostering discussions and mutual understanding. Such conscious and intentional choices also underscore mutual respect for languages. In this way, the linguistic identity of learners is recognised, and it serves as a potent tool for involving learners in the learning process.

Secondly, CMPL also aims to resolve the terminological ambiguity by including within its ambit societal multilingualism, individual plurilingualism, as well as the complexities that plurality involves. Creativity, spontaneity and an open mind are fundamental pillars for such an approach. Thirdly, CMPL strives to deconstruct multilingualism. This would foster intercultural understanding amongst learners in a two-pronged way – one, appreciating cultural complexities transmitted through languages and two, understanding and negotiating target language cultural references in the light of the local cultural idioms. This can be achieved by empowering teachers through training. Training of language and foreign language teachers as linguistic and cultural mediators, empowering them and creating a toolkit for multilingual resources, are vital elements if a paradigm of Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism (CMPL) is to be envisaged and implemented.

The paradigm of Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism represents a reflective and intentional approach to navigating and valuing linguistic diversity in language learning. Unlike traditional views that treat multilingualism as a passive state of language knowledge, this paradigm emphasises critical awareness, agency, and metalinguistic reflection in the use of multiple languages. It encourages individuals not only to use their linguistic resources but also to recognise the socio-political implications, power dynamics, and identity negotiations embedded in language practices. Drawing on theories of complexity, plurilingual competence and translanguaging, Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism invites learners, teachers and speakers to engage deliberately with their languages, make informed choices about when and how to use them, and view language as a means of dialogue and inclusion rather than of hierarchy and separation. It aligns with critical pedagogies that promote linguistic citizenship (Stroud, 2001), encouraging both educators and learners to reflect on how language shapes access, belonging, and cultural understanding. Thus, this paradigm transcends mechanical language acquisition, promoting instead a holistic, ethical, and 'aware' multilingual engagement with the world.

Conclusion

Appreciating multilingualism involves moving beyond tokenistic gestures toward a deeper recognition and acknowledgement of learners' linguistic repertoires and cultures in situ. Classrooms should become spaces where the plurality of languages and repertoires is not viewed as confusion, but rather as a complementary richness that enhances meaning-making and learning. This requires the creation of multilingual classroom resources, the promotion of reflective activities that actively involve students' other languages, and a deliberate effort to sensitise teachers to how linguistic diversity can be harnessed as a source of cognitive and cultural capital. As Armand (2012) argues, the goal is to avoid "cognitive wastage" by valuing the full spectrum of students' linguistic knowledge and the complex interconnectedness of all learning. It also calls for a deconstruction of dominant representations and perceptions that frame linguistic deficiencies as a deficit. Instead, educators are invited to foster respect, mutual acceptance, and humanisation through inclusive practices that affirm each learner's identity. Ultimately, the paradigm of Conscious Multi-Pluri-Lingualism enables a more equitable and reflective pedagogy- one that makes conscious and informed pedagogical choices in a meaningful way, to not just teach languages but also cultivate critical, compassionate, and culturally grounded citizens. Similar to the concept of "two-eyed seeing" (Smith et al, 2023) in North American Indigenous epistemologies, wherein Western and indigenous worldviews are held in respectful balance, CMPL invites us to reimagine multilingualism through a humanistic, pluralistic lens of complexity while reliving India's homegrown, endemic, multilingual nature. Such a perspective enables the construction of a conceptual framework grounded in equity, linguistic human rights, and cultural respect. In doing so, it not only enriches academic inquiry but also affirms the dignity and value of diverse linguistic identities.

Acknowledgement

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