Multilingualism and day-to-day life in India: Explorations

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Language is not only a code system to connect humans but also a socio-cultural marker in most Asian societies. Most research on language has been undertaken in linguistics, education, and literature. But explorations of language as a communicative practice and connector/conflict of/for communities is much needed within the social sciences. In India, language has a history and geography of protest/violence, and 'enforced' multilingualism is a state matter. The linguistic landscape of India is 'normatively' multilingual. For instance, there is no clear distinction between the use of 'a particular language' in public and private spheres; mobile phones bring private spheres into the public domain. The day-to-day life in India is publicly trilingual and people habitually code-mix English words in conversational practice. Though multilingualism is a 'lived reality' for the researcher, this paper attempts to empirically examine the norms of multilingualism through the exploration of public life in the most modern city of India – Mumbai. Mumbai is the financial capital of India and is the sixth largest urban agglomeration in Asia.

The study is aimed at examining the presence of 'language' in day-to-day public spaces with reference to women. Using a qualitative approach, the sources of data are street signs, observation of language practices in the women's compartments of local trains, focus group discussions, and personal observational analysis of language landscapes and conversations. The objective of the study is to examine if linguistic diversity is a reality and how it is being practiced in day-to-day life. It also attempts to empirically examine the role of the use of 'a particular' language in the public sphere. The preliminary findings indicate that while linguistic diversity is a 'norm', it is not only a spoken device but a written apparatus for its users. Yet there are only a small number of languages being used in written as well as oral forms for diverse purposes in the public sphere. The expected outcomes of the study are to validate the multilingual character of India, as well as explore the role of language in the day-to-day life of urban Indian. It intends to provide empirical evidence for 'multilingualness' in the public life of people living in a cosmopolitan city.