**Feminism, Jaat, aur Code-Mixing: Linguistic politics in social movements, and jaativad aur feminism mein ka pharak**

**-Niyati Bafna, Preetha Datta**

Now, we’ve heard a good deal about why the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak). Once one has deciphered Spivak’s indirect ways, however, we realize that she is in fact asking the more important question: ‘can the subaltern be *heard*?’ and the answer to that is ‘No sir, the subaltern cannot be heard, because although they are speaking, they are doing so in bhaasha and in prasang and stithi that you, who have been cultivated into certain other structures of language that also correlate, incidentally, with a more privileged and hence powerful position in society, simply cannot parse.’ In short, the subaltern are speaking, but nobody can hear them.

At the present socio-political juncture of the nation, both Indian feminist politics and reservation politics are prominent on the reform front: while three million women line up across 620 K to fight against a regressive ‘purity’ tradition, Rohit Vemula has only recently committed suicide, and Bhima Koregaon is still raw in our memories. The 1980’s backlash against reservation has not died down, and neither has the systemic oppression of women and Dalits. Can we assume, on the other hand, that conversation around these issues, i.e. speaking, has exploded? Caution is of essence. Which conversations have burgeoned, and which conversations cannot we hear? Are the subaltern talking or being talked about? Where are we looking for these conversations? What are we looking for? The matter, as Plato said, is complicated. Let’s return to these questions in a bit.

At her most simplistic reading, we can instantiate Spivak’s argument to say that, suppose the subaltern do not speak the language of a discourse, they are, if not silent, muted. Configuring this idea into the Indian context, we can locate the players here: English, of course, occupies the position of the language of academia and intelligentsia, the subaltern, in this case, are the Dalit communities and the communities of women, and the language which they can speak, presumably, is their homegrown native tongue: for the purposes and scope of this project, Hindi. The question, then, becomes this: what is the linguistic nature of the conversation around Dalit politics and women’s concerns, and **what is the difference between them**? Understanding this is key to beginning to unravel some of the questions above - although it is still not sufficient. For this, we must attempt to understand, first, the relationships of English and Hindi to both of the discourses under study.

Modern feminism in India, a feminism that is based in universal human rights and gender equality (rather than the feminism of, say, Rani Lakshmi Bai), can be considered to have begun in the nineteenth century, roughly around the abolition of Sati (1829), passed by the then governor-general of India William Bentinck, upon the petitions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, among others. Raja Ram Mohan Roy also advocated for English education for India, supported by Lord Macauley in his famous ‘Minutes on Education’: we need, he said ‘a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’ (Macauley). The class of educated Indians, containing social reformers, that emerged, therefore, upon the onset of the twentieth century were belonged this class of English-speaking individuals, and it is this very class we observe today, who have the global morals and the parlance with which to talk about women’s rights. No wonder that feminism is considered still, today, to be restricted to ‘elite’ upper-5% circles: not yet a movement of the masses of Indian women. It is hardly an original hypothesis to say that English is a language of liberation for women, and a space occupying which they can distance themselves from an oppressive tradition, and integrate themselves into a global framework of universal human rights. Fun fact: a study has found that women tend to swear more in English than in Hindi. Given context, it is not difficult to see why.

This is, of course, still not the whole picture. Perhaps feminists, both men and women, would choose the equipment and discourse that an international language such as English provides: however, there are millions of Indians, especially women, who simply don’t speak English. This is the flipside to the situation: if we find, in fact, that this discourse lives in English, it indicates the truly subaltern are being neither addressed nor heard.

English as a vehicle of deliverance figures also in the arena of Dalit politics. Dr. Ambedkar, for one, did his Ph.D at Columbia, and the seminal work for Dalit nationwide is his *Annihilation of Caste*, written in English (although then disseminated in various Indian languages); in fact, a Dalit community in Uttar Pradesh inaugurated a temple to the English language and Macauley because English was the key, in their eyes, to upward social mobility, better jobs and better marriages. It is, also, an ideological step away from regional tongues that are often inflected with caste-discrimination: for example, ‘Limbale’s Marathi would not be the same Marathi as that of a Chitpavan Marathi-speaking person from Pune’ (Kothari 61). Caste divide often operates in one’s very manner of speaking in regional tradition, as theorized by several scholars. English, then, provides a neutral and promising space that permits aspiration and an escape from this all-pervasive system: ‘the plea for English is because of its refusal to recognize caste as a priori… English helps redefine identity and imagine a pan-Indian Dalit unity, while also allowing a vocabulary of human rights (Kothari 67).

So far, we are on familiar grounds, and we have probably drawn some important parallels between these two social movements. Do we expect, then, to find the same registers of language with respect to Hindi and English in these discourses? The point at which they (theoretically) fall apart comes next: we don’t, in fact, expect this, and for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, the reason we expect a lot less English in the Dalit discourse than seems to be indicated above is that we are conflating two different target discussions: English is the language the Dalits *aspire to converse in*, and our corpus exhibits conversation *around Dalit politics*. This includes just about anyone talking about, say, जात and बहुजन समाज पार्टी, or their resentment against the OBC quota. We do not in fact know the identities of the handles whose tweets we have gathered; let us remember that while we cannot make any assumptions about these, we can still safely assume that the Dalit community, even if they do speak English, will be a minority.

Secondly, the Dalit community in India is highly politicized and is re-emerging as politically visible (Dhareshwar, 122) – (which is not to say that Dalits themselves are politically visible) – as compared to that of women. This is manifest most obviously in the turbulence around caste reservation, but also in the existence, for example, of entities such as the BSP on a national scale. Furthermore, there is an extensive taxonomy (Mahars, Gujjars, Yadavs, Brahmins) that is associated with the multilayered system of caste, inherited from a traditional entrenched system of codification and social structure. None of this is to say that the patriarchy as a system is less entrenched in traditional regional language use, the point is simply that there is no terminology that Hindi provides that politicizes women as a unit – creating, therein, a generic discourse that would have been in a regional language. And so, Dalit politics gets integrated into the mass discourse of politics in general, which it is not unreasonable to estimate (especially given the ahem interesting ideas of our current Prime Minister) contains a considerable Hindi component, and feminism as a discourse gets circumscribed by the boundaries of a particular educated section of society.

**So what are we doing about this?**

Good question. We are collecting data from Twitter, which it is fashionable to assume for convenience is representative of society at large, and we are testing this very hypothesis on it: i.e. that the discourse around Dalit politics contains a larger relative Hindi presence than that around women’s concerns. We compiled, for this purpose, a list of central concepts ranging across three super-categories (Emotion, Ideology, Functionality), including, for example, ‘equality’, ‘discrimination’, ‘elections’, ‘anger’, etc., generated Hindi and English equivalents for each, and compared Hindi percentages of occurrences of each word cluster and category between the two discourses. We also looked at a couple of related statistics, such as the quality and presence of code-mixing in each corpus, a Tweet-level comparison, a line-level comparison, etc., to better understand absolute and comparative language use in these two buckets.

**What we found**

We found, upon collecting the results, that in accordance with our expectations – and slightly overshooting, them, in fact – the Dalit corpus contains a proportion of Hindi (both Romanized and Devanagari) that considerably exceeds that in the Feminism corpus. The general Twitter baseline for English-Hindi is 70-30; we obtained a 35-65 ratio in the Dalit corpus, and a 78-22 ratio in the Feminism corpus. The skew between them is very telling, of course, but the divergence from the baseline itself tells us that the content of a discussion affects the linguistic choices made by the members of a community: i.e. that while the usual Twitter discussion has a 70-30 divide, there is something about the sociocultural aspects of the discourse on feminism that exhibits a heavier bias towards English, and, similarly, something about the Dalit discourse that causes it to exhibit a skew towards Hindi (and, as we observe, Devanagari Hindi).

We observed a higher presence of Hindi in the Dalit discourse on all counts, in fact, except certain word clusters (शर्म-humiliation, for example). We also found that despite this, the percentages of code-mixed sentences in each corpus were almost the same: i.e. exactly 15%, indicating that while people may choose to talk in different language, they code-switch with about equal frequency. However, even here, the phrasal code mixing was higher in the Dalit discourse, indicating that the feminism discourse is both heavily inclined to English and exhibits slightly less fluidity between Hindi and English.

**So what?**

Another good question. What are the stakes of this study? As a society looking to reform itself in general, the politics of speech is key to understanding representation and progress. Who gets to speak, and where, and how? Why, or why not? A sociolinguistic analysis aids us in understanding the disadvantage of the communities that cannot speak English, the repression of the communities that want to adopt English along with what they perceive comes with it, and the conversations of a community in the presence of a Hindutva that increasingly resents English.

Must we introduce a wing of social outreach that translates the concept and the discourse of feminism into regional languages, and brings them to the doorstep of the rural girl? Must we be on the alert as political propaganda increasingly populates these discussions? Must we campaign for the reform of Hindi itself, as the French did for gender neutrality? Language is a prime site of both expression and oppression – and the matter, of course, is complicated.

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