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Who's Afraid of Multilingual Education?

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Introduction

Since the 1970s mother tongue-based multilingual education has been a serious focus of attention in educational research communities and among policy-makers in most countries in the world. With the failure of European colonial discourses – which resulted in tragedies such as slavery in North America and mistreatment of aboriginal populations in various parts of the world from Canada to Australia – educational leaders, researchers and educators have become sensitive to the importance of the cultures, languages and identities of minority students. Moreover, with globalization gaining momentum, unprecedented waves of immigration have turned most large cities into multicultural societies dealing with multilingualism as the normal linguistic status in urban life. Also, digital devices and the internet have smoothed exchange of culture and language in ways never experienced before. With all these developments, a question of the place of students' cultural, literate and linguistic backgrounds in education – including their mother tongues – is indeed a very relevant question. Mother tongue-based multilingual education, accordingly, has been an important topic of conversation in most parts of the world. Iran, nevertheless, has been an exception.

Although multiculturalism and multilingualism – with more than 70 languages spoken in Iran (Ethnologue, 2015) – are crucial elements of Iranian life, there has been very little attention to multilingual education in Iran both in Iranian academia and in Western academic centers. The political and economic isolation of Iran over the past decades has made academic exchange between Iranian scholars and the international research community rather slow, particularly in humanities and by extension educational research. Also within Iran, despite the demands of minorities and the endeavors of language activists, serious explorations of issues regarding multilingual education have been hindered for political reasons. The Iranian political system is highly centralized and speculations about using students' mother tongues as the medium of instruction have typically been silenced and treated as separatist desires. This book attempts to underline the importance of creating mother tongue-based multilingual schools in Iran by adding the voices of established international scholars and academics to the mother tongue debate in Iran.

Importance of More Serious Attention to Multilingual Education in Iran

Much has been written about the importance of the role of students' mother tongues in academic growth and teaching through the medium of mother tongues. Scholars and educators have discussed multilingual education particularly with a focus on social justice and the empowerment of minority students (García *et al.*, 2006; Schecter & Cummins, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984, 2000, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). Researchers have also written about the importance of using students' home languages in the process of teaching and learning in conversations about bilingual education (Baker & García, 2006; Soltero, 2004), heritage language education (Cummins & Danesi, 1990; Polinsky, 2011) and minority education (Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988).

Since the 1970s, issues and challenges involved in multilingual education and multilingualism have been discussed in the Anglo-American world with their problematic colonial legacy: histories of slavery, mistreatment of aboriginal populations and continual waves of immigration; in post-war European countries in the process of negotiating new identities after the failures of modern nation-state discourses; in post-colonial nations such as countries in Africa and Asia in order to revive native identities; and in multiethnic multilingual civilizations such as India and China. Iran, nevertheless, has had very little share of this exchange of ideas and experiences.

Much, for instance, has been written about multilingual education in the US (Crawford, 2000; Dicker, 2003) and Canada (Allen & Swain, 1984; Shapson & D'Oyley, 1984). There are also many publications about multilingualism in Europe. Next to the literature that discusses multilingual education in Europe in general (Busch, 2011), specific contexts in Europe have also been focused on. For example, Björklund *et al.* (2013) wrote about multilingualism in the Nordic Countries. In another example, the Basque Country, with its intense struggles for linguistic rights and rich experiences with reviving the Basque language, has also received much academic attention (Cenoz, 2008; Cenoz, 2012; Urla, 2012).

In a similar fashion, post-colonial nations have had a significant share of the literature on multilingual education. Much has been published about multilingual education in Africa (Alexander, 1989; Bamgbose, 2014; Hibbert & van der Walt, 2014; Kamwangamalu, 2005; McIlwraith, 2013; Okedara & Okedara, 1992). South Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka have also shared their experiences regarding multilingualism with the international research community (Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon, 2009; Chong & Seilhamer, 2014; Davis, 2012; Gill, 2013; Lal & Xiaomei, 2011).

India and China, Iran's civilizational cousins, have not been left out of the international debate about mother tongue-based multilingual education

either. Similar to Iran, India and China have always been multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual civilizations. They also have long histories of educational practices dealing with multilingualism as well as rich multilingual literatures reflecting their experiments with multilingual education in different historical periods. Also, like Iran, India and China borrowed models for their modern educational systems from the West at the peak of the dominance of the European ‘nation state’ discourse with its emphasis on ‘one language’ for a ‘unified nation’ and have had to deal with its unpleasant consequences for native tongues in education systems (although Indian policies regarding multilingual education have been much more flexible than those of Iran and China, even during the colonial period). Unlike the relative academic silence about multilingualism in Iran, much has been said about multilingual education in India (Khubchandani, 1981; MacKenzie, 2009; Mohanty, 2010; Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013; Pattanayak, 2014; Rao, 2013). China has also been an important part of this conversation (Feng, 2007). The Iranian context, however, has had a smaller share of the international academic attention.

Despite the rich diversity of Iranian languages, there has not been enough deliberation in mainstream Western educational research about the linguistic rights of speakers of minority languages in Iran, Iranian languages in educational contexts and the place of students’ mother tongues in Iranian classrooms. The relative invisibility of the Iranian context, however, does not mean that the fields of linguists, applied linguistics and language education have been entirely void of publications about Iranian languages and multilingualism in Iran. Linguists have studied languages spoken in the Iranian Plateau and their historical developments (Ingham, 2006; MacKenzie, 1969; Windfuhr, 2009). Other scholars have also written about multilingualism and minority languages in Iran (Bani-Shoraka, 2005; Bayat, 2005; Hassanpour, 1992; Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Jahani, 2005a, 2005b; Perry, 1985; Sheyholislami, 2012; Weisi, 2013). Moreover, recently a number of graduate dissertations have reported results of empirical studies on the experiences of Iranian students (for instance, Hoominfar, 2014; Weisi, 2013). Building upon the said endeavors, this book attempts to take a closer look at the challenges of creating space for mother tongue-based multilingual education in Iran by inviting four established scholars to share their international experiences in connection with Iranian issues. This interaction could be beneficial for both Western academics interested in multilingual education and Iranian researchers, educators and mother tongue activists.

The Iranian Context

All the civilizations in the long history of the Iranian Plateau, including today’s Iran, have been essentially cultural and linguistic mosaics. Despite

the visible impact of a variety of linguistic contacts – the most important of which might be the influence of Arabic vocabulary on Persian (and other languages spoken in Iran) after the Arab invasion in the 7th century – the peoples of Iran have managed to protect many of their languages.

In contemporary Iran more than 70 languages are spoken (Ethnologue, 2015). One of today's variations of the Persian language, Farsi, is believed to be the mother tongue of almost half of the population of Iran (more than 40 million people). Next to Farsi, other Iranian languages with large numbers of speakers include Kurdish, Luri, Baluchi and Gilaki. Among these languages, Kurdish and Baluchi loom large in the mother tongue debate in Iran. The majority of speakers of these two languages are Sunni Muslims, religious minorities in a country run by a Shiite government that considers Shiism as one of its ideological pillars. In this context, reflections about linguistic discrimination against Kurdish- and Baluchi-speaking minorities are inextricably intertwined with other political, social and cultural problems.

In addition to Iranian languages, there are two other linguistic families in Iran. First, different variations of Turkic languages are widely spoken in Iran. The best representative of the Turkic languages in Iran is Azari Turkish (or *Turki* as pronounced in the language). Although a non-Iranian language (linguistically not from proto-Iranian parent languages (Skjaervo, 2012)), Turki should hardly be considered a minority language in today's Iran; almost 20 million people speak the language both in Iran's Azerbaijan and in Persian areas of central Iran through mass Azari migration especially to Tehran, the capital (Haddadian-Moghaddam & Meylaerts, 2015). In comparison with the Kurds, Turki speakers have been more visibly assimilated into the mainstream cultural and political circles; nevertheless, like other minorities, they are not allowed to use Turki in schools as the medium of instruction.

Second, although with fewer speakers, Semite languages (such as Arabic, Assyrian and Hebrew) are also spoken in Iran. Among these languages, the situation of speakers of Arabic in Iran is rather complicated. Although Arabic is spoken by a relatively small population (less than 2%) (Haddadian-Moghaddam & Meylaerts, 2015), the impact of Arabic on Iranian culture through the Muslim invasion and the uncomfortable history between the Persians and the Arabs have left the speakers of Arabic in Iran in a sensitive and vulnerable situation. Iranian Arabs have been exposed to racial and linguistic *othering*, being regarded as cultural invaders. Despite the complexities of the histories and conditions of the languages mentioned above, the speakers of all these languages face a common problem: although Iranian minorities have clearly articulated their concerns about their linguistic human rights, central governments have not let them use their languages in schools as medium of instruction since the establishment of the modern Iranian education system, whose models were borrowed from the West (especially France) at the beginning of the 20th century.

A social concern surrounding the importance of mother tongue in education became a distinct socio-cultural and political discourse in Iran when, roughly after the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the Iranian government adopted a policy of centralization following the European political philosophies that advocated the creation of nation states. The contemporary problem of the dominance of Farsi in Iran mainly started as a result of the policies of Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979). During Reza Shah's reign, Farsi became the dominant language of the country, the medium of instruction in schools and the only channel of linguistic communication in governmental offices. In this period, although the Fundamental Law (*Qanun-e Asasi-e Mashruteh*) did not declare Farsi as the official language, Farsi literacy became a requirement for civil service and official positions. Since Reza Shah's days, the mother tongue problem has remained practically the same: Farsi is the only official language with tens of other languages that are, openly or covertly, deemed less important than Farsi.

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, Reza Shah's nationalist narrative was replaced by Khomeini's idea of an Islamic civilization whose borders, he hoped, would not remain limited to today's Iran. Khomeini had explicit intentions of exporting the revolution to all nations in the Islamic world. This plan might appear to have required more linguistic flexibility than Reza Shah's attempt to create a uniquely Persian identity; nevertheless, the policy of one language for a united nation remained intact and the speakers of minority languages hardly experienced more linguistic freedom.

In today's Iran the only legal shelter for Iranian minority languages is a section in the Constitution commonly referred to as Clause 15. Clause 15 can be summarized as follows. (1) The Farsi language is the official language of the country; accordingly, all governmental correspondence and educational textbooks should be written in Farsi. (2) Ethnic minorities can use their own languages in the local media and press. (3) The children of the members of ethnic minorities can study their own literatures at school. 'Literatures' in this sentence is generally interpreted as folk literature and arts as a core subject in schools rather than an indication of the legality of receiving education through the medium of the mother tongue. Some also argue that 'literatures' can include students' mother tongues but as long as they are taught as core subjects and independent courses and not used as the medium of instruction.

There is a general consensus among Iranian historians and intellectuals that, despite the colonial tendencies of Persian civilization and evidence of discrimination against minority cultures in the region, the experiences of minority populations in Iran have not been as bitter as the experiences of minorities in the West. For example, to the best of our knowledge, Iranian minorities have never experienced anything similar to Residential

Schools in Canada. Iranian ethnicities, moreover, have not been moved out of their lands and, despite numerous military conflicts, there are no examples like slavery in the US or forms of ethnic cleansing such as the Holocaust in Europe. On the other hand, children have been prevented from speaking their own languages at school (and sometimes have been punished for it), gatherings of people to protect minority cultures have been seriously interrupted and language activists have been arrested (Hassanpour, 1992).

Methods

In everyday language the words 'Farsi' and 'Persian' are usually used with the same meaning. However, in more careful writing and speech the choice between 'Farsi' and 'Persian' – and its other contemporary variations such as *Dari* spoken in Afghanistan and *Tajiki* spoken in Tajikistan – might be motivated by political sensitivities and historical power relations, a detailed description of which would be beyond the scope of this book (see, for instance, Spooner, 2012). All through this book the words 'Persian' and 'Farsi' have been used to mean the following.

'The Persian language' in this book refers to the main linguistic body used by the Persians and other nations, peoples and ethnicities that have borrowed and used the language in any form. In this sense, 'Persian' can mean any of the variations of the language including Old Persian, Middle Persian and *Pahlavi* (a Middle Persian language and script), Classic Persian (Persian used after the Arab Invasion), *Dari* and *Tajiki*. 'Farsi' in this book refers to the contemporary Persian spoken in the Persian areas of Iran. Also, in the context of education policy, 'the Farsi language' in this book refers to the contemporary Persian, which is to be taught by law to all K–12 students in the country and to be used as the main medium of instruction in any classroom in Iran regardless of what students' mother tongues are. Standard Farsi in this sense is generally deemed the Farsi spoken by educated middle-class people mainly in Tehran and the Farsi broadcast from nationwide state TV and radio stations.

The mother tongue debate in Iran is extremely insular and has remained far from international scholarly and educational exchanges of ideas about multilingual education. This isolation has impacted the Iranian intelligentsia so much that at times their conversations sound as if the problem of the mother tongue in Iran were an entirely Iranian issue and there were nothing that they could learn from international experiences. Moreover, because of political restrictions, few empirical studies have been allowed to be conducted on multilingualism and the experiences of multilingual students in Iran. As a result of this scarcity of empirical research, academic communication between Iranian and international academics and educators has not been established in stable and meaningful ways. The above circumstances

have rendered the mother tongue debate in Iran very local, which consequently has left Iranian language activists in a vulnerable position inasmuch as their arguments are treated as separatist desires rather than a demand for more linguistic rights, similarly fought for in different nations all over the world. This book is an attempt to bring the debate in Iran onto the international academic stage by inviting four prominent international scholars to add their thoughts, experiences and voices to the mother tongue debate in Iran. The four interviews in this book were conducted as follows.

Over 300 documents were combed in order to identify the arguments used in Iran against the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the classroom. These documents – most published over the past 40 years – included policy documents, bylaws and statements published by governmental institutions, chief among them the Ministry of Education and the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, whose members have been very vocal against any form of mother tongue-based multilingual education. As importantly, the publications and public statements of influential intellectual and cultural figures who opposed the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction were also studied in search for their arguments in favor of Farsi-only schools. Since there are not many empirical studies on the situation of minority students in Iran, most of the arguments were extracted from the media and the press – mainly in newspaper article and TV interview formats. Regardless of the academic rigor observed in these conversations, these ideas have been extremely impactful since they have reached a wide audience through the mass media. In the last step of the process, these arguments, sorted in themes, were critically discussed in interviews with four international scholars, of whom I will talk later in more detail.

Broadly speaking, there are four main groups of arguments against mother tongue-based multilingual education in Iran: (1) the necessity of one single official language for unifying numerous ethnicities in the country; (2) fears of separatist movements encouraged by foreign powers and neocolonial designs; (3) the unique linguistic and cultural advantages of Farsi over the other languages spoken in Iran; and (4) logistical challenges making an actual change towards multilingual education practically impossible.

Using a single language for a unified nation might be one of the oldest arguments against multilingual education, but it is still widely popular in Iran, not only among policy-makers but also among academics and intellectuals, and even within influential figures in the political opposition and the diaspora. The supporters of Farsi as the only official language and the only medium of instruction refer to the experiences of other nations in the world and argue that many other multilingual nations have also accepted the dominance of one official language as a pragmatic measure. They, for instance, refer to Spanish speakers in the USA and claim that they have accepted English as the official language as a ‘natural’ move in the process of assimilation for the sake of the unity of their country. Farsi supporters invite

the speakers of minority languages in Iran to accept the status of Farsi as the official language of the country as a pragmatic move to unify the nation as has been, they claim, repeatedly practiced in other parts of the world.

The second group of arguments warns against separatism. The supporters of Farsi as the only medium of instruction fear that providing linguistic rights will strengthen separatist desires within minorities. They particularly emphasize that the separatist movements in Iran have been guided – or at least taken advantage of – by external neocolonial and regional powers.

Third, the supporters of Farsi as the main medium of instruction argue that Farsi has unique linguistic characteristics that make it the best language in the country for education, science and commerce. They argue that Farsi is a linguistic amalgam of all the languages spoken in the Iranian Plateau and thus belongs to every minority. In other words, they claim, Farsi is the Iranian Esperanto constructed by all minority languages. Moreover, with an emphasis on the long history of written Persian and its wide repertoire of different genres, they claim that no other language in the country can facilitate expression and communication better than Farsi. Using Farsi with such an intellectual infrastructure, they maintain, guarantees the success of both the individual and the society.

The final theme in the arguments against replacing the current Farsi-only system with multilingual schools includes views holding that multilingual education is not a bad idea but it is impractical. They argue that employing different mother tongues in the educational system is not feasible for two reasons. First, it is an unbearably expensive affair, which will make the provinces with minority groups, generally living in less prosperous areas than Persian areas, even more destitute. Also, considering the large number of languages spoken in Iran and also the multilingual nature of each province with different languages and dialects and accents, it would be impossible, if not unfair, to elevate status of a few languages like Turki and Kurdish to pretend that the mother tongue issue has been solved.

Although these arguments, and their variations, are discussed in this book as local concerns in Iran, they indeed echo universal views that have not been friendly towards bilingualism and multilingualism for different reasons and in different places. In the US context, for instance, the same ideas have been prevalent among the advocates of English-only schools all through American history (Crawford, 2000; Wiley, 2007) and have continued up the present with great impact on policy-making. One regularly cited example would be the California Proposition 227 (1998) bill, by whose mandate most bilingual education was dismantled in the State of California (Crawford, 2007). The conversations in this book thus might appeal to a larger audience than Iranian academics and educators, including anyone interested in issues regarding multilingual education and multilingualism. This appeal to an international audience might be felt better by the knowledge of the fact that the experts who I interviewed, in their response to the

Iranian situation, touched upon a large number of topics concerning multilingual education in a variety of places, including North America, Europe, India, China and Central Asia.

The arguments for Farsi-only schools in Iran, extracted from articles, documents and interviews in the manner described above, were discussed in four conversations with the following scholars: Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Jim Cummins, Ajit Mohanty and Stephen Bahry. In our conversations, these scholars were invited to comment on the arguments made by the supporters of the dominance of Farsi in schools, drawing upon their research and experiences. In order to create a logical progression of the topics in the book, the interviews are presented in the following order. First, in an interview with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, we focus on policy and legal complexities regarding linguistic human rights. This conversation helps the readers follow the book with theoretical frameworks that can shed light on the rest of topics, which are more pedagogically oriented and focus on certain geographical places. In the second interview, Jim Cummins responds to the questions with an eye on pedagogy. While reflecting on policies regarding multilingual education in Iran, Jim Cummins speaks about the pedagogies that can foster educationally nurturing conditions for speakers of minority languages. In the two final chapters, Ajit Mohanty and Stephen Bahry, in response to the Iranian situation, focus on multilingual education in two civilizations that bear close historical, cultural and political similarities to Iran. In the third interview, Ajit Mohanty speaks about multilingual education in India and in the last interview Stephen Bahry shares his views about multilingual education in China and Central Asia.

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas famously conceptualized the practice of linguistic discrimination as *violation of linguistic human rights* and *linguistic genocide* (Curdt-Christiansen, 2004; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, 2006, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 1994). She has been a prominent figure in creating the foundations of what is known today as mother tongue-based multilingual education. Her endeavors have been extremely instrumental in creating frameworks that can empower minority groups and disadvantaged populations by valuing their mother tongues and local languages, and consequently their identities and cultures (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). She has also been one of very few Western scholars familiar with issues regarding language policy in Iran thanks to her involvement in research on the situation of the Kurdish language in Iraq and Turkey. In this book, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas shares her evaluation of the Iranian policies on multilingualism and multilingual education and responds to the advocates of the dominance of Farsi in schools.

Jim Cummins's contributions to multilingual education have been substantial and far-reaching (Cummins *et al.*, 2001). His work has long inspired literacy teaching and learning all over the world. Next to the creation of theoretical frameworks that have been borrowed by researchers and

academics, Jim Cummins's work has informed and highlighted best examples of multilingual pedagogy. He has showed that additional language learners in monolingual schools are at a disadvantage because learning academic linguistic skills takes significantly more time than developing basic communication skills (Cummins, 1981, 2008). He has written about student identity emphasizing the necessity of the presence of students' mother tongues – as an essential component of student identity – in the process of teaching and learning (Cummins, 1994, 2001, 2011a). He has talked about *literacy engagement* and how important access to print, including multilingual texts in diverse schools, is in the process of literacy learning (Cummins *et al.*, 2012; Cummins, 2011b). Also, he has created the concept *identity text* to underline text production activities that can incorporate students' identities, backgrounds, cultures and literacies into the process of learning and that can challenge the power relations that tend to keep minority students disadvantaged (Cummins *et al.*, 2005; Cummins & Early, 2011). Jim Cummins in this book critiques the arguments that support Farsi-only schools and offers recommendations for improving the situation of minority languages in Iranian schools.

Ajit Mohanty is a well-known Indian scholar who has researched and written about multilingualism in general and multilingual education in India in particular (Mohanty, 1990, 2006, 2010; Mohanty & Perregaux, 1997; Mohanty *et al.*, 2009). He has written about the dynamics and challenges of creating multilingual educational systems in India. For instance, he has been heavily involved in supporting multilingual schools in India's Odisha. Iran and India share many cultural and historical similarities. These civilizations have always been multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural societies. Also, both of these countries have had to struggle with the legacy of imported modern Western educational models, which were not particularly considerate of students' native languages and cultures. A conversation with an Indian scholar of the stature of Ajit Mohanty, thus, can indeed inform any study of multilingualism in Iran. The same is also true about multilingualism in China and Central Asia, which motivated me to invite Stephen Bahry to contribute to this project.

Stephen Bahry has extensively researched and written about language education in China and Central Asia (Bahry *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Bahry, 2005; Niyozov & Bahry, 2006). The mother tongue debate in Iran has surprisingly remained out of touch with language issues in China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. In the same manner, multilingualism in most of the above countries has remained under-researched in Western academia. Stephen Bahry's research reveals histories and experiences that can enrich the mother tongue debate in Iran and at the same time inform Western readers interested in multilingual education about topics not typically covered in mainstream multilingual education research. Stephen Bahry's contribution to this book is very important in that historical

developments in China and especially Central Asia are directly related to socio-cultural and socio-political life in Iran.

After the concluding chapter that follows the interviews, Jaffer Sheyholislami also adds an afterword to the book. Sheyholislami is a Canadian linguist of Kurdish origin from Iran who is an Associate Professor at Carleton University in Ottawa. He has widely published in English and Kurdish on the language, media and identity of the Kurds in general but Iraqi and Iranian Kurds in particular (Sheyholislami, 2011, 2012, 2016). In his publications, he has been critical of the one-language one-state policy in Iran and has advocated for multilingual education.

Mother tongue-based multilingual education, similar to other dimensions of multicultural education, is tightly connected to critical pedagogy, anti-racism and social justice (Nieto & Bode, 2008). The topics discussed in this book are crucially important for the education of millions of children in Iran, particularly at this historical crossroads when the Middle East is rapidly transforming. The dedication of the above esteemed scholars to multilingual education and their generous response to my invitation for supporting this project emboldened me to think of publishing this book. I hope these interviews can open new horizons in the mother tongue debate in Iran, establish better communication between Iranian and international educators, and contribute to the ongoing conversation about multilingualism in the international research community.

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