



Critical Literature Review

Nation, Religion, and Language Ideology: The Case of Postcolonial Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on language ideology (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) as an analytical lens, I conduct a historical analysis of the sociocultural and political developments that led to the construction of Bangladesh as a nation-state and that have influenced people's attitudes and beliefs toward certain languages. I argue that analyzing the construction of language ideology is important, not only for the Bangladeshi context, but also in Bangladeshi diasporic communities, to understand language practices that have been shaped by the sociopolitical and ideological developments in their home country. Immigrants' language practices play a significant role in their language learning and settlement in the host society. Though Bangla language is at the heart of Bangladeshi nationalism (Kabir, 1987), it is the *shuddho* (correct/standard) Bangla that is inculcated in the nation-building discourse. Despite nationalistic fervor around Bangla, in Bangladesh the English language has more importance in terms of functionality, power, and status. Additionally, Arabic is considered as a holy language in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. These ideological characterizations of the three languages index the identity of their users and shape their language practices and beliefs. Thus, analyzing the historical forces that contributed to the construction of the language ideologies can shed light on the language practices and language learning of Bangladeshi Bengali immigrants and their settlement.

RÉSUMÉ. Inspirée de l'idéologie linguistique (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) en tant que cadre théorique, je mène une analyse historique des développements socioculturels et politiques qui ont donné naissance à la construction du Bangladesh comme état-nation, et qui ont formé les attitudes et croyances de sa population envers certaines langues. Je propose une analyse de la construction de l'idéologie linguistique, que je considère primordiale, non seulement dans le contexte du Bangladesh en tant que pays, mais aussi dans le cas des communautés diasporiques, dont les pratiques langagières dépendent des développements sociopolitiques et idéologiques du pays d'origine. Ces pratiques langagières jouent un rôle important quand vient le temps d'apprendre les langues et coutumes des nouvelles sociétés où ces immigrants s'installent. Quoique la langue bengalie soit au cœur du nationalisme bangladais (Kabir, 1987), c'est le *shuddho* bengali (la langue dite 'standard') qui soit inculqué au discours de l'édification de la nation. Malgré le lien entre la langue bengalie et la ferveur nationaliste, c'est néanmoins l'anglais qui semble valoir plus en termes de puissance, statut, et utilité. En plus, la langue arabe se traite comme langue sacrée au Bangladesh, dont la religion principale est l'islam. La compréhension sociale de ces trois langues indexe les identités des



locuteurs et aide à façonner leurs pratiques langagières et leurs croyances. Une analyse des forces historiques qui ont contribué à la construction des idéologies linguistiques au Bangladesh peut alors nous faire mieux comprendre les pratiques langagières et les idéologies associées à l'apprentissage d'autres langues pour les peuples bangladais immigrants, concernant leur intégration dans leurs nouveaux pays d'accueil.

Keywords: *Language ideology, Bangladesh, immigrants, language, religion.*

INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the historical development of Bangladesh as a nation-state and the role of language and religion in the characterization of the state in order to understand the language practices of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada. I adopt a language ideology framework (Heath, 1989; Irvine & Gal, 1985, 2000; Kroskrity et al., 1992; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) to critically examine relevant historical forces, their development, and their impact on the language practices of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada. My broader research aims to explore the language learning experiences, language practices and settlement experiences of skilled Bangladeshi Bangla-speaking Muslim immigrants and how their ethnolinguistic-religious identity intersects with their integration in Canada. My language and learning epistemology has poststructural and sociocultural underpinnings. Drawing on a poststructural conceptualization of language (Bourdieu, 1991), I see language as a marker of the accumulated capitals of its speakers that signifies the embedded power relations among them. Drawing on a sociocultural theory of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I see learning not only as a cognitive process, but also as a socially situated activity that requires learners' participation in practices determined by their access to communities. In this view of language and learning, learners are social agents who bring their own perceptions and attitudes toward language(s) that are shaped by their language ideologies; therefore, understanding the language learning and practices of Bangladeshi immigrants requires insight into the perceptions and attitudes toward language(s) that shape them. Understanding perceptions and attitudes calls for a critical study of the ideologies associated with the languages in the repertoire of Bangla-speaking Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants; such ideologies are a product of historical, sociocultural, and political phenomena.



In this article, I examine the historical background, development, and birth of Bangladesh as a nation-state; the intertwining nature of language and religion in the politics of the region; and the development of the religious and linguistic identities of the Bangladeshi Bangla-speaking population of Islamic faith. I then analyze how and why language ideology serves as an appropriate lens to understand the language practices of Bangladeshi immigrants.

IMMIGRANTS AND LANGUAGE

Proficiency in the host country language is an essential immigration criterion and is considered by some scholars a requirement for successful social and economic integration into the host society (e.g., Adamuti-Trache, 2012; Ali & Alam, 2015; Boyd, 1990; Boyd & Cao, 2009; Chiswick & Miller, 1988; Derwing & Waugh, 2012). Despite the importance of host-language proficiency for immigrants, very few scholars have explored the language learning and integration process of skilled immigrants (Giampapa & Canagarajah 2017; Han, 2007; Victoria, 2017). Being second-language (L2) speakers of English, Bangladeshis in Canada face language issues while navigating and integrating into Canadian society. In fact, Bangladeshis are unfavourably positioned compared to other South Asians in Canada (Agarwal, 2013; BIES Report, 2013; Ghosh, 2014). Bangladeshis mostly come to Canada within the skilled migration category, meaning they have the required educational and professional experience and linguistic abilities. However, according to a 2013 research report by the Bengali Information and Employment Services (BIES) in Toronto, Bangladeshi immigrants identified lack of English language skills as a significant obstacle in seeking employment in Canada. This ultimately impacts their career related decisions and trajectories. The present study demonstrates that the language-related experience of skilled immigrants is a complex phenomenon that requires careful study. I aim to understand how Bangladeshi immigrants learn English upon immigration and what their attitudes are towards both learning English and the language itself. These underlying beliefs and perceptions toward language and language learning can be explored through the lens of language ideology.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), in their review of existing scholarly work on language and ideologies, mentioned that, although research related to language and



ideology had been dominant in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, and sociolinguistics, studies on ideologies of language were only recently becoming a field of inquiry. Twenty-seven years later, in an increasingly globalized context, it is even more important to critically engage with the field of language ideology. Mass migration from periphery to core countries, from postcolonial regions to the colonial powers, increasing influx of refugees, rising capitalism in the Global South, new technologies, and changing political scenarios all have profound impacts on people's lives at many levels, including individual language practices, mobility, access, and meaningful participation as social agents. On the one hand, the necessity for effective communication among different language speakers, especially in immigrant-receiving countries in the Global North, such as Canada, has increased. On the other hand, the rising importance of English serves to strengthen its linguistic, cultural, and political hegemony over other languages, both locally and globally (Kachru, 1985; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). Also, Blommaert (2003) argues that globalization does not simply reinforce the top-down spread of English, but also suggests the presence of a local niche that accepts English as a resource to be included in the users' repertoire.

The combination of these factors, such as migration, sociopolitical development around the world, the rise of neoliberalism, and the increasing polarization of ideologies and politics, impacts not only language policies within a national boundary, but also has influences on a global level. Thus, when L2 speakers of English immigrate to English speaking countries, they bring their attitudes and perceptions toward the dominant language of communication and the underlying ideology(ies) that have been shaped historically by the superior status of English. Also, the languages in L2 speakers' repertoires are important constructs within their identities. It is therefore important to understand the language practices and associated ideologies of L2 speakers in order to explore their settlement as immigrants.

This article is part of broader research where I aim to explore the language learning, language practices, and settlement experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada with a focus on how their ethnolinguistic and religious identities intersect with their language learning and settlement. Bangladeshi immigrants are an underrepresented group in sociolinguistic research in North America, especially in Canada (Zaman & Habib, 2018). To understand the language learning and language



practices of Bangladeshi immigrants, it is important to examine the language ideologies that dominate such learning and practices. In the social view of language, linguistic forms are markers of their users' social identity, and therefore, represent the "broader cultural images of people and activities" (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p.37). Linguistic differences, therefore, index distinctions not only in language, but also in the values, beliefs, and practices of social groups. Thus, it is suggested that language ideologies reveal the origin and impact of linguistic differences on users' practices and the subsequent implications for society. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) stated that critical analysis of language ideologies is important, as they "serve as a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk" (p. 55). Therefore, studying the language ideology of a particular society reveals its dominant power structures and the manifestation of those structures in everyday communication. Language ideologies also "envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality and to epistemology" (p. 56) and therefore shape individuals' ways of being in and understanding the social world through their own language use. Consequently, I understand language ideology as how groups of people view the language(s) of different social groups and their users, including their own, and, vice versa, how language ideologies impact people's attitudes and social relationships and reproduce power relations. This brings us to the question of the construction of ideologies and the historical and political forces that contribute. The authors cited above stress the importance not only of studying language ideology, but also of examining the forces dominant in constructing those ideologies.

Ideologies associated with language(s) are products of complex socio-historical and political processes that require close examination of the forces that shape language forms today. Woolard (1992) claimed that language ideology and "social, discursive and linguistic practices" (p. 235) have a dialectical relationship of influence with each other; this relationship also reproduces and represents the power relations and linguistic politics in a given society. As mentioned before, this article is part of a broader project on skilled immigrants from Bangladesh. A language ideology lens will help me to gain a nuanced understanding of the language practices and settlement of this inadequately researched community. In this article, I take a look back in history to examine the social, cultural, and political development that led to the creation of today's Bangladesh as a nation-state. I also examine the forces and phenomena that have been profound influences on the culture and practices of the



Bangla-speaking Bangladeshi Muslim population. Through this analysis, I aim to provide a glimpse into the historical development of the ideologies associated with certain languages in Bangladesh today and how they influence the language practices and social activities of Bangladeshis at home and abroad. I must mention here that I focus only on the Bangla-speaking Muslim population, partially because of my own ethnolinguistic and religious affiliation with this population. A focus on other religions and ethnic languages of Bangladesh is outside the scope and focus of this study. I also believe that it is necessary to study this ethnolinguistic and religious minority group of people and their settlement in North America as part of the backdrop of the rise in Islamophobia globally (Kazi, 2021; Kumar, 2012).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The following sections shed light on the history of the Bengal region and today's Bangladesh from pre-colonial times, the spread of Islam, the way local people have interacted with Islam, the rise of nationalism and religious identity, and the construction and implications of language ideologies.

Present-day Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country and one of the most densely populated countries in the world, home to almost 170 million people (Statista, 2021). Bangladesh is conceived to be and is projected as a monolingual country, drawing on the conceptualization of **বাংলা** [correct] Bangla as "standard Bangla." The Bangla language is associated with Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh. This nationalist zeal and the equating of "correct" with "standard" marginalizes the many varieties of Bangla and their speakers within Bangladesh. Needless to say, "standard" Bangla not only marginalizes other varieties of Bangla, but plays an imperialist role in marginalizing ethnolinguistic minorities. While the Bangla language is linked to Bengali nationalism, English enjoys a higher status in postcolonial Bangladesh (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). Also, Arabic has a special position among the Muslims of Bangladesh, being the holy language of Islam, even though only a few Bangladeshis understand it. The Bangla language spoken in Bangladesh features many Perso-Arabic words (Faquiere, 2010, Rahim, 1992; Uddin, 2006) due to the history dating back to the start of Islamic civilization in the subcontinent and in Bengal. While Persian vocabulary has seeped into the Bangla language for everyday



activities, Arabic has a higher status among Muslims and has distinct functions in daily prayers and religious activities. These Perso-Arabic linguistic forms characterize language practices, especially the practices of the Muslim population, such as exchanging greetings in Arabic. Many Bangla-speaking Muslims also commonly intersperse Arabic words that have religious affiliations in their language. Thus, in Bangladesh, it is possible to guess a person's religious affiliation through their language practices. This reflects the fact that religion is an important category in constructing language ideologies to understand the linguistic differences between social groups. It also shows the significance of nationhood and nationalism, as well as colonization and globalization, as relevant categories of ideological constructions within each language. According to Friedrich (1989), religion and nationhood are two important ideological constructs. These two constructs have both shaped and been shaped by the politics of the region, contributing to the constructed ideologies that dominate the beliefs and practices of social groups.

Thus, Bangla, English, and Arabic have distinct positions in Bangladesh among different social groups. Understanding the positions and ideologies associated with these languages requires a historical analysis. This is carried out in the subsequent sections.

History of the Bengal Region

To understand present-day Bangladesh, it is imperative to look into the history that has sewn the social fabric of the country. It is impossible to study the history of Bengal without considering the various empires that have ruled the region and the religions that have flourished in each empire. These various empires and religions left an indelible mark on the people of Bengal and its social, cultural, and political composition, and formed the nation as it is today. In fact, the different empires or eras in Bengal are marked by the distinct religious philosophies and cultural traditions brought by the rulers. Therefore, religion is an integral aspect of the history of Bengal, as it has influenced and shaped local life significantly.

Present-day Bangladesh is a relatively new nation-state; it marked itself as an independent country on the world map in only 1971, after gaining independence from Pakistan. However, the region, commonly documented as the Bengal region, has a long-standing history dating back thousands of years (Eaton, 1993).



Bangladesh is part of the Indian subcontinent—composed of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—which was under British rule for almost 200 years (1757–1947). The subcontinent gained freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. It was partitioned in the same year, based on the “Two-Nation Theory” that viewed Hindus and Muslims as separate communities and led to the birth of a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan (Jalal, 1995). In 1947, Pakistan was comprised of two geographically separated regions: West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan, which was also known as East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). West and East Pakistan were not only geographically separated, but also had ethnolinguistic and cultural differences (Uddin, 2006). The differences and turmoil between West and East Pakistan grew, resulting in the 1971 War of Liberation when East Pakistan gained independence from West Pakistan and Bangladesh was born as a nation-state.

This small snippet of history provides only a partial picture of the flux of different languages, cultures, religions, and their impact on the politics and ideological characterization of the region. It is necessary to delve into history and analyze the sociocultural and religious trajectories to understand the roles and ideologies associated with languages in the subcontinent and, more specifically, in Bangladesh, and their influences on Bangladeshi Muslims’ language practices.

The Pre-Colonial Age (before 1757)

The Ruling Dynasties

The Bengal region was divided into West Bengal, with Kolkata at its centre in present-day India, and East Bengal, which is present-day Bangladesh. Before the 8th Century (Common Era), Bengal was comprised of many local kings and their kingdoms (Islam, 2011). It was during the 8th-Century Pala dynasty, established by the Buddhists of the land, that the region came under one kingdom. The Pala dynasty ruled for a few centuries until the rise of the Sena dynasty in the 11th century. The Sena dynasty was a Hindu dynasty; the rulers came to Bengal from Karnataka, South India. According to Islam (2011), the religious harmony that was achieved during the Buddhist Pala dynasty was disrupted by the Hindu rulers of the Sena dynasty. Thus, the Bengal region was initially under the rule of Buddhist and Hindu rulers, with the majority local population following Buddhism, Hinduism, and



indigenous religions until the 12th century, when Bengal came under Muslim rule. Muslim rule was established in Bengal in 1204 when Iqtiak Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiar Kjlji, a Turkish Muslim warrior, conquered Bengal (Uddin, 2006). After that time, Bengal was led by different Muslim rulers. Islam flourished under the Muslim rulers and reached its peak when Bengal came under the dominion of the Mughal empire in the early 17th century (Uddin, 2006). The Mughals continued to rule Bengal, and indeed the entire Indian subcontinent, until the rise of British colonial power. It is important to mention here that the Muslim rulers of Bengal were of foreign descent, including Arabs, Turks, Abyssinians, and Afghans (Uddin, 2006). The inter-religious harmonious nature of Bengal that was disrupted by the Sena dynasty was restored during the Muslim empire (Dasgupta, 2004; Islam, 2011). This short historical overview chronicles the different ruling periods in Bengal and explains how deeply religion is entrenched in the sociopolitical developments of Bengal and in the lives of its people.

The Spread of Islam

Islam came to India and to Bengal through foreign Muslim conquerors. Today, after the Arabs, Bengali Muslims are the third largest ethnic population of Islamic faith in the world (Eaton, 1993). Though the ruling power remained in the hands of the foreign-descended Muslims, the religion spread widely in rural areas among the locals in Eastern Bengal (Bangladesh). Eaton (1993) claims that this wide spread of Islam among working-class people in the rural areas in Eastern/East Bengal deserves careful study, as such an extensive spread of Islam is not seen in other parts of India, including West Bengal. There are a number of theories, such as migration theory and “religion of the sword theory” (Uddin, 2006), that have attempted to explain this spread of Islam in Bangladesh, but they either fall short of evidence, or they do not adequately explain the phenomenon. Eaton (1993) argues that Islam did not rise in Bengal because of the ruling class Muslims, but was spread by the *Sufis*, who played an instrumental role in spreading Islam to remote areas in East Bengal—a low-lying land with huge bodies of water and dense forests considered almost uninhabitable. The early *Sufis* were of foreign descent too; however, they managed to connect with the local working-class. The ruling Muslim class of foreign descent consisted of administrators, traders, leaders, and orthodox believers. They pursued a Perso-Islamic lifestyle, and developed Persian and Arabic literature (Dasgupta, 2004). They were the *Ashrafs*—the aristocratic Persian and/or



Arabic speaking Muslim class in Bengal—whereas the local Bangla-speaking population who converted to Islam were considered the *Atrafs*, who consisted mostly of the rural peasant and artisan classes (Sharif, 1987; Uddin, 2006). Thus, there was a very clear distinction between the *Ashrafs* and *Atrafs*, depending on their ethnicity, language, class, and lifestyle in Bengal (Uddin, 2006). Though the *Ashrafs* considered their culture superior to that of the locals in Bengal, they also assimilated with the local culture, which then resulted in the intermingling of Perso-Arabic culture with Bengali indigenous culture (Uddin, 2006). Also, there was intermarriage between the two classes. The later *Ashrafs*, being born on Bengal soil, could not continue to distinguish themselves from the locals (Uddin, 2006).

Though the increasing conversion accelerated the growth of the Muslim population, it did not come into conflict with the existing religious beliefs in the region. In fact, a syncretic cultural motif was developed with the coexistence of different religions and practices. The converted local rural Muslims' practices were markedly different from those of the Urban Ashraf Muslims. The Ashrafs' practices involved Arabic and Middle Eastern norms. The *Atrafs* incorporated their local norms and practices into their newly found belief. Thus, they practiced an indigenized Islam independent from Perso-Arabic influence and different from what was followed in the northern parts of the subcontinent (Sharif, 1987). This tradition later became a source of criticism on the legitimacy of the Muslimness of the Bengali Muslims (Uddin, 2006). This history marks the beginning of a gap between the different social groups in Bengal, as well as a potential divergence from Middle Eastern religious practices, and establishes an indigenized Islam practised by the people of Bengal.

In pre-colonial India, including Bengal, Persian was the language of the court and the elite during Muslim rule. In the pre-Muslim era, Sanskrit was the high-status language used in literature and at court. Bangla was never considered a legitimate language by the elite class and was spoken mostly by working-class people, which can be taken as an indication of the position and status of Bangla and its speakers in the society.

British Colonial Era (1757–1947)

The impact of colonial rule on the sociocultural and political history of the subcontinent is vast. Languages and religions were not exempt from the politics of



the colonial powers. The British viewed Hindus and Muslims as “two separate communities with distinct political interests” (Uddin, 2006, p. 48). Consequently, different strategies were developed by the colonizers to interact with and govern the people of these two faiths. Christian missionaries also had different strategies for Hindus and Muslims to convert them to Christianity, which was presented to the locals as equivalent to modernization in India (Uddin, 2006, pp. 47-49). The missionaries spread Christianity; the initial negative responses by the local Hindus and Muslims to the conversion invitation soon turned into “internal communal debate” (Uddin, 2006, p. 49). This division between Hindus and Muslims was one of the deciding factors leading to partition and the formation of India and Pakistan as nation states. Since then, religion has been a determining force in subcontinental politics.

In 1837, English replaced Persian as the language of the court in British India. Colonial rulers used local languages for government administration purposes (Pennycook, 1994). Thus, Urdu—written in Perso-Arabic script, which derives its vocabulary predominantly from Arabic and Persian—became the language of governance in most regions in Northern India. Though Urdu was spoken by both Muslims and non-Muslims of those regions, the language gradually became associated with Muslims specifically, taking on a “cultural symbol” status for the formation of Muslim identity during the period of British rule in the subcontinent (Uddin, 2006, p. 59). Due to this *iconization* (Irvine & Gal, 2000) of Urdu, Muslims started identifying with it, while Hindus began to identify with the Hindi language, which is written in Devanagari script and derives its vocabulary from Sanskrit. Along the same vein, Bangla was seen as a language of the Hindu community due to its subcontinental roots. This construction of Urdu as an Islamic language for the Muslims in the subcontinent further marginalized the Bangla speaking uneducated Muslims in rural Eastern Bengal, the majority of whom belonged to the working class (Kabir, 1987; Rahim, 1992). Though Bengali Muslims considered Urdu an Islamic language, their day-to-day spoken language was Bangla. This disassociation from Urdu alienated Bengali Muslims from the subcontinental Muslim community (Uddin, 2006, pp. 108–109). Meanwhile, English became the dominant language for education and work opportunities under British rule, a legacy that has become even stronger in today’s globalized context.



Tension between Hindu and Muslim communities in Bengal was fueled during British rule, and both communities took part in the struggle for independence to realize their dreams of separate lands for Hindu and Muslim communities. Thus, colonial rule ended in 1947 and, out of the Two-Nation Theory, India and Pakistan were born.

In this section, I have portrayed the colonial rules and politics and the sociopolitical and linguistic situation of the subcontinent before 1947. The next section elaborates on the region's history after the 1947 Partition.

The post-partition Pakistan era (1947–1971)

Though Pakistan was born out of the concept of “one religion, one country,” tension soon erupted between Urdu-speaking West Pakistan and Bangla-speaking East Pakistan (previously, East Bengal). It was religion that united the West and East Pakistanis; however, it was language that led to their division. West Pakistan was the capital of undivided Pakistan. The West Pakistani rulers wanted Urdu to be the state language of newly formed Pakistan, as Urdu was the cultural symbol of the Muslims of the subcontinent. Bengali Muslims naturally objected to the proposal; Bangla language speakers were far more numerous in East Pakistan than their Urdu speaking counterparts. In addition, Urdu was regarded by Bengali Muslims as the language of the elite, whereas Bangla was the language of the working-class Bengali Muslims. Also, there were people from other faiths, and Bengal has had a tradition of cultural diversity, tolerance, and brotherhood (Islam, 2018, p.20). The then-East Pakistan therefore proposed to have both Urdu and Bangla as state languages, a proposal which was turned down vehemently by the then-West Pakistani rulers (Alam, 2007). There was even an attempt to “de-Sanskritize” Bangla and “Arabicize” it, as Sanskrit was identified as the language of the Hindu community, and thus, Bangla—being derived from *Prakrit* (an ancient subcontinental language dating back to the Sanskrit era) and written in a script derived from Devanagari, which was used to write Sanskrit and Hindi—was seen as a Hindu language (Uddin, 2006. pp.108-125). As a result, the Muslims of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) were perceived as being less Muslim than their non-Bengali counterparts, because they spoke Bangla. After the 1947 Partition, the western wing of newly-formed Pakistan was rife with the perception that the Bengali ethnicity and Bangla-speaking Muslims in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) were different from their non-Bengali



**Journal of Belonging, Identity, Language, and Diversity (J-BILD)/
Revue de langage, d'identité, de diversité et d'appartenance (R-LIDA)**

2022 • Vol. 6(1) • 97-110 • ISSN 2561-7982 •



SPECIAL ISSUE: LPP2020, Part 1

Muslim West Pakistan countrymen (Uddin, 2006, pp. 124-125). The complex political history of the subcontinent, already divided on the surface issue of religion, and the subsequent division of West and East Pakistan had the effect of politicizing the languages and religions of the region. After that time, linguistic differences between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bangladesh began to index their different social identities. Religion, thus, became a politicized category for constructing ideological characterizations of language forms, to differentiate between the language practices of the different communities.

East Pakistanis (Bengalis) protested the cultural and linguistic aggression of West Pakistan and the “purgation” of the Bangla language. The proposal to have both Urdu and Bangla as state languages was turned down by West Pakistani rulers. On February 21st, 1952, police fired on a student-organized procession in Dhaka. This event marked the foundation of Bangla nationalism, indicated a distinct Bengali identity, and eventually led to the War of Liberation of 1971 (Azim, 2002; Uddin, 2006, pp.125–126). During the Pakistani era, due to unresolved state language issues, English remained the language of communication between East and West Pakistan, and thus, colonialism’s legacy was carried forward. The War of Liberation was an important historical event, not only because it laid the foundation for the liberation of Bangladesh, but also because it invoked nationalism based on *language* as an ideological construction of Bangladeshi/Bengali identity. In this struggle for Bengali identity based on the Bangla language, Bangla, in Bourdieu’s (1991) words, becomes an “object of mental representation” (p. 220) that created a category to imagine, perceive, and recognize Bangla speakers as a distinct community within a separate territory, thereby conceptualizing a nation as a geographical boundary within which people speak one language. Thus, the ideology of nationalism became associated with the Bangla language within an imagined nation state.

Religious perception and segregation, ethnic and linguistic differences, and economic and cultural exploitation by West Pakistan led to separation from Pakistan and gave birth to Bangladesh as an independent nation-state in 1971 (Islam, 2018). This struggle for independence also meant that East Bengal, for the first time in many centuries, regained sovereignty and the right to self-governance. The foundational stone of this newly liberated land was laid by Bengali ethnicity and Bangla nationalism, rooted in the Bangla language (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007;



Sultana, 2014). This review of history suggests how religion has been politicized during the British and Pakistani colonial eras and how religion and nationalism as ideological constructs have become intertwined with the languages of the subcontinent.

A review of these historical events established the purpose and significance of using a language ideology framework to understand immigrants' language practices in the diaspora. Since sociopolitical and historical developments in the Bengal region, intertwined with language and religion, have had such a profound impact on the lives of the people, it is important to review and understand these developments in order to explore Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants' attitudes and perceptions towards languages in a very different context, where they belong to minority communities.

People's Republic of Bangladesh (1971–present): Balancing Religion and Secularism in the Construction of the Nation

Bangladesh, as a separate nation state, was recognized on December 16th, 1971 after a nine-month war with former West Pakistan. The ideological structure and characterization of the new nation drew from Bengali ethnicity and the Bangla language, while maintaining a secular stance as one of the founding principles of Bangladesh. It is important to mention here that secularism in Bangladesh is conceived as being inclusive of all religions, contrary to the Western conceptualization of secularism that attempts to exclude religion from public life (Brubaker, 2013). Bangla became the state language of independent Bangladesh. The Bangla-centered ethnic and linguistic ideology of Bangladesh lent it a monolingual character (Sultana, 2014), and excluded the ethnic minorities of Bangladesh who are not Bengali, do not speak Bangla, and are mostly followers of indigenous faiths. Also, there are many varieties of Bangla spoken in different regions of the country. The standard variety is that spoken by the urban educated middle-class in Dhaka, the capital; it is also the official language, which marginalizes regional vernaculars. A study by Hasan and Rahman (2014) on the standard Bangla language ideology demonstrates the higher status of standard Bangla over the regional varieties.

Over the years, Bangladeshi nationalism has evolved, balancing between secularism and the religiosity crafted by political leaders. Through changes in power and



government, the secular identity of Bangladesh that was a founding principle during the war of independence has been lost, and a Muslim national identity has gained prominence. The rise of the Muslim nationalistic identity can be attributed to the country's political turmoil and the increasing influence of globalization that opened doors for an Arab- and Middle-East-oriented Islam in Bangladesh. Thus, the struggle between religion and culture in Bangladesh remains an inconclusive one that has been a source of "confusing tensions and uneasy stalemate between Muslim nationalistic Bangladeshi identity and the more secular, religiously and culturally pluralist Bengali identity" (Islam, 2018, p. 20). The urban, western-educated secular intellectuals failed to understand the religious sentiment of the majority by disassociating Islam from Bengali identity in their dominant discourses, which has further polarized the issues around language, ethnicity, and religion in the nation-building discourse of Bangladesh. This has perpetuated the confusion that Islam (2018) aptly captured in the above quote. These political and sociocultural developments contributed to language ideologies that impact the language practices of the different social groups in Bangladesh.

Attitudes and Perceptions toward Languages

The various contesting factors in the history of the subcontinent and of Bangladesh moulded attitudes and perceptions toward the different languages that are used in this region. I now discuss the languages that have a dominant impact on the identity and practices of Bangladeshi people, especially the Muslim population.

English enjoys a position of status and power in postcolonial Bangladesh, even though the country seems to lack a clear language policy. Though English is used extensively in education and the private sector in Bangladesh, there is no explicit policy about the status of English, and it does not have official status (Hamid, 2011; Hossain & Tollefson, 2007; Rahman & Pandian, 2017). However, the attitude towards learning the English language is very positive in Bangladesh, irrespective of people's socio-economic backgrounds (Alam, 2017; Erling, et al, 2013; Erling et al, 2012) and is not viewed as a burden from the legacy of colonial rule (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). English is seen as a vehicle of development by the majority in Bangladesh. It is also seen as the language that symbolizes modernity, progress, and membership in the elite class. English is still a language of the local elites in postcolonial Bangladesh. It acts as a gatekeeper and is responsible for social



stratification (Choudhury, 2008; Hossain & Tollefson, 2007; Imam, 2005). English is important for education in Bangladesh, to the extent that the schooling system is divided into three categories: English-medium, Bangla-medium, and Madrasa (Quranic) education, depending on the amount and quality of English taught in these schools. It should come as no surprise that the English spoken by the elite members of society is considered the most powerful and 'correct' version of the language. This creates an ideology that dominates people's attitudes and beliefs, not only toward English but also toward Bangla, and that shapes their social lives.

Though the Bangla language is the foundation stone of Bengali nationalism and symbolizes Bengali culture, it holds a somewhat lower status than English. Due to the elite status of English in Bangladesh, English contributes to social inequality and furthers the gap between different social classes, marginalizing and disempowering Bangla and creating a 'vernacular divide' (Ramanathan, 2005). In fact, in recent years the use of English in Bangladesh, especially in the media, has grown to such an extent that the High Court had to provide a verdict to maintain the official language status of Bangla in Bangladesh and to reduce unnecessary use of English (HC rules on use of Bangla everywhere, 2014). Remember the standard Dhaka variety of Bangla is considered the official language. This standard Bangla dominates the practices of urban educated Bengalis and pushes the other regional varieties to the margin. Thus, even within the Bangla language and its use, there are social structures involved that encourage and perpetuate a specific Bangla over the other varieties and that contribute to the construction of 'standard' language ideology (Green, 1997). This totalizing character development of Bangla ignores the other varieties and removes them from standard language discourse, a process that Irvine and Gal (2000) named as *erasure*.

A distinctive feature of Bangla in Bangladesh is the presence and use of many Arabic and Persian words. This also reflects the historical and cultural composition of the population and acts as a marker of Bangladeshi Bangla-speaking Muslims identity. Arabic is considered a sacred language in Bangladesh, being the language of the holy Quran and the preferred language of Islam. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are taught to read the Quran in Arabic. However, the majority learn to read the Quran without understanding the language. Yet, respect toward the language is intact, as it is considered the language of Islam. Bengali Muslims recite Arabic verses from the Quran in their prayers and many Arabic words/phrases related to religion are



commonly used by Muslims in Bangladesh in their speech. The Arabic language is important in the Madrasa education stream in Bangladesh.

Bangla, English and Arabic each have their distinct place in Bangladeshi people's lives. While Bangla is the language of Bengali nationalism, English is equated with modernity and progress, and Arabic is important for the religious affiliation of Muslims. The accelerating pace of globalization has furthered the value of English in Bangladesh, where it has been treated as a language of power for centuries. This historical analysis reveals the background of the sociocultural, linguistic, religious, and political struggle and development in the Bengal region and today's Bangladesh, and the forces that contributed to the construction of ideologies associated with the languages. The languages and their practices act as identity markers of the social groups, their social positions, and activities.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND THE BANGLADESHI DIASPORIC COMMUNITY

This historical overview is necessary to understand the dominant ideological constructs that flourished in the region called Bangladesh today, as well as their affiliation with, and representations in, languages and society. As mentioned before, this article is part of a critical sociolinguistic research project where I aim to explore the language learning, language practices and settlement of Bangladeshi Bangla-speaking Muslim immigrants in Canada. Immigrants' lived experience in Bangladesh is shaped by the dominant ideologies that are reflected through the languages. These ideologies influence their attitudes and perceptions toward languages, even after immigration. In fact, it becomes more important after immigration, as languages act as identity markers for social groups, and identity issues come to the forefront when people are away from their homeland. Language ideologies, therefore, can explain the impact of conceived differences between languages, language forms, language practices, and the social activities of their speakers. As Woolard (1992, p.137) stated, "ideology calls attention to socially situated and/or experientially driven dimensions of cognition or consciousness" and languages are vehicles through which ideologies are practised and sustained. Irvine and Gal (2000) claimed that people's language ideologies "locate linguistic phenomena as part of, and evidence for, what they believe to be systematic behavioral, aesthetic, affective, and moral contrasts among the social groups indexed" (p. 37), suggesting that language ideologies are important constructs in shaping people's beliefs, attitudes,



and relationships with their languages, the languages of other social groups, and their language practices.

Analyzing language ideologies and people's practices is important for my broader research questions. It is necessary to understand how Bangladeshi immigrants view the dominant languages in Canada and how their perceptions influence their language learning, settlement, and relationships within the Bangladeshi community and other communities. Canada promotes multiculturalism within a bilingual framework (Haque, 2012) and recognizes English and French as the official languages of the country, contributing to the dominant language ideologies and colonial legacies in the process. Bangladeshi immigrants, being postcolonial subjects and coming from a hierarchical society where English plays a role in social inequality, have experienced English as part of the colonial legacy in their own country. Globalization has further solidified the importance of English(es) worldwide. It is worth investigating how carrying this complex ideology associated with the English language in an English-speaking country shapes the social activities and relations of Bangladeshi immigrants. Han (2007, 2011, 2014, 2019) argues that language ideology needs to be conceptualized and examined when exploring immigrants and their social relations, language learning, and practices. She further claims that the notion of standard language ideology is paramount in L2 teaching, where learners are supposed to acquire a "native-like" proficiency. This native-like proficiency concept perpetuates the standard language ideology, where it is shown that there is a particular way of speaking English that must be attained by learners, and, therefore, places the speaker of that specific variety on the upper end of the hierarchy. This concept is found in Bangladesh as well, where English is the language of the elite. Thus, this elitist view of English, reinforced through a standard language ideology, shapes the social relations of the learners with the host society where English is the dominant language. Since language learning is a socially situated activity shaped by participation in social activities, access to participation is important. This raises questions about which language and language speakers are seen as native speakers of English, who has greater access to social networks, how they are viewed by other social groups, and how the concept of standard impacts social structures and relations. These questions bring us back to ideological queries; therefore, understanding language ideology and the forces that create it will shed light on Bangladeshi immigrants' language practices, and social and power relations. I argue that adopting language ideology as a critical lens will enable a much-needed



analysis of the attitudes and perceptions pervasive among Bangladeshi immigrants and in Canadian society when it comes to languages.

It is also important to understand how a loss of linguistic capital, along with other forms of social capital, shapes immigrants' lives. The majority of Bangladeshi immigrants speak English as an additional language. French has no official status in Bangladesh, nor is it part of the education system, suggesting that not many Bangladeshis have skills in French. Bangla has little functional value in Canada outside the home or the Bengali community. Thus, the attitudes and feelings that Bangladeshis harbour toward the Bangla language, and how Bangla is perceived by other communities, impact the social activities and language practices of Bangladeshi immigrants.

Lastly, Bengali Muslims are likely to maintain their Arabic knowledge, as Ferguson (1982) observed that religion is key in maintaining language knowledge after immigration. The limited knowledge of Arabic among Bangla-speaking Bangladeshi Muslims, and their ideology toward the language, may have further implications for their social practices and relationships with other community members in Canada, given the political and historical characterization of the country.

CONCLUSION

My aim in writing this article was to explore the various forces that created the language ideologies within the historical, sociocultural, and political structures of the region named Bangladesh. Examining the construction of dominant language ideologies in Bangladesh and in Canada is necessary to understand Bangla-speaking Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada, their language practices, and the impact on their settlement. Reviewing the history of the land called Bangladesh and its ideological characterization, or lack thereof, prompted me to analyze the historical events that shaped the ideological constructs of the land and how the ideologies have become implicit in the languages and the people's activities. Language ideologies index the social identity of different groups and explain how power relations are reproduced through language. They also explore our underlying beliefs and perceptions, not just about languages but also about their speakers. As Bucholtz (2001) argues, language ideologies include not just language, but also other identity constructs, such as race and class. Bangladeshi skilled immigrants, an



ethnolinguistic and religious minority group in Canada, even after proving their English language skills in the immigration process, struggle to navigate Canadian society. Lack of language proficiency has been identified as one of the core reasons by the people themselves. I understand language learning as a social process that can be achieved through socialization, rather than as a classroom-based phenomenon. I argue, therefore, that it is essential to explore the language ideologies dominant among Bangladeshi immigrants and in Canadian society to examine the settlement trajectory of this group of immigrants. It will help us to understand skilled Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants' language learning and language practices, how they view Canadian society and its dominant languages, how they are viewed and positioned in the society and why, and how they navigate their settlement journey in Canada.

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