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Introduction

It is a great honour to be asked to write an introduction to these fantastic volumes by an esteemed colleague and guru and a very dear friend whom I have known for over 40 years. One difficulty is to try to avoid making it a hagiography. But a major challenge is that it is impossible to select in any ‘objective’ way what to include. This will be a personal and subjective collection of quotes and reflections. Ivan Illich’s introduction to Debi’s 1981 book was a book in itself – mine will be a very short prelude¹.

All Debi’s writings and actions have in multiple ways revolved around issues of social justice, and challenged parents, (other) educators, policy makers, political activists, and community organizers to critically examine both the theoretical and practical keystones of the concept, especially in relation to language and education. Even when he has written on more specialised linguistic questions, these have been related to broader socio-economic and political issues. He has constantly, to borrow from the African-American writer and poet Pierre Orelus’ background paper for his new book *Critical Dialogues for Social Justice: With the Diverse Talented Tenth Educators and Public Intellectuals of the 21st Century* (see <http://education.nmsu.edu/ci/porelus.html>), kept “in mind the ways and the degree to which intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, sexism, linguisticism, ... xenophobia, ageism, and ableism, have been normalized in schools and society at large through ideological, political, and socioeconomic apparatus[es] that have been set in place to oppress and discriminate against certain groups of people in society, particularly those who have been historically marginalized”. Debi’s depth and breadth of knowledge, his capacity to relate the various issues to each other, and write in ways which are scientific, philosophical, poetic, and, in most cases, eminently readable for people with no specialist knowledge, are simply amazing. He has a capacity to capture book-length insights in one or two philosophical sentences. Some of my favourite examples follow, with short comments.

Debi pioneered the study of many language policy issues that caught on in the West much later, and which Western scholarship has tended to be given all the credit for. When considering ‘new’ directions/trends in multilingualism studies over the last decades in the ‘West’, it is obvious that many of the trends are not new at all. The issues have been discussed eminently well for a long time in what the journal *New Internationalist* calls ‘the Majority World’. We chose to dedicate the book *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*, edited by Ajit Mohanty, Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson and myself (Orient Blackswan, 2009) to

¹ Prelude: “an action or event serving as an introduction to something more important”.

two intellectual and philosophical giants in sociolinguistics, Debi, and Joshua Fishman. One of the characteristics that connects them is that both have always been both timeless, and much ahead of their times. Some of the topical western discussions right now about fluid boundaries between languages, constant changes in languages and cultures, multiple identities, “doing” language, all are something that, for instance, many Indian sociolinguists and psycholinguists (Khubchandani, Annamalai, Dua, Mohanty, Dasgupta, etc) have been describing for decades – there is nothing new in the sudden “western” realizations of it. Ajit Mohanty’s formulation sums it up in his description of India:

the fluidity of perceived boundaries between languages, smooth and complementary functional allocation of languages into different domains of use, multiplicity of linguistic identities and early multilingual socialization (Mohanty et al. 1999).

It is tempting – and dangerous - to uncritically enthuse about these ‘new’ fads. In the realm of ‘playful’ socio- and applied linguistics (often playing intellectual games very far from ordinary peoples’ realities), notions of ‘language’ and ‘mother-tongue’ are being contested. Kathleen Heugh and I state,

We need to contextualise contemporary debates about the term ‘mother tongue’. The extensive recent literature variously suggests that the term is reductionist, anachronistic, sexist, essentialist, obsolete, etc. These debates are mostly confined to philosophical lexical discussions amongst linguists and sociolinguists rather than the communities who use the term, not in a literal and necessarily monolingual sense, but in a figurative and often multilingual sense. Whether one is in a village in India or Nepal; in a small town in Tanzania, Malawi, Senegal, Cameroon, Mozambique or Eritrea; in the Republic of Mari-El in the Russian Federation, or in Northern China or Sri Lanka, ordinary people use the term ‘mother tongue’ in its broad figurative sense. Sometimes it is meant in a singular form, sometimes in relation to several varieties or a continuum (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 2010: 18).

When influential researchers (like Alastair Pennycook and Jan Blommaert, and even Suresh Canagarajah and Stephen May, although more carefully and ambivalently) now claim that languages (and thus mother tongues) do not exist, and that there is at the most a contingent if any relationship between language and identity, their attempts at showing this pale in comparison with Debi’s much more post-post-post modern and at the same time age-old way of confirming the relationship. This is how Debi puts it:

Places are not geographical concepts; they exist in people’s consciousness. So does the concept of “mother tongue”. It is not a language in the general sense of the word, neither is it a dialect. It is an identity signifier waiting to be explained (Pattanayak 1992).

Debi has in the first volume the most detailed explanations, descriptions and problematisation of the concept of mother “mother tongue” that exists. My own exercises in this area (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 105-155; xxxx) have benefited enormously from his wisdom.

Debi's analyses of and attitudes towards what he – hopefully a bit ironically – calls “the developed world” expound healthy scepticism. Even if he sometimes overgeneralises and exaggerates slightly about the west, most of his criticism is well-founded and deserved:

The dominant monolingual orientation is cultivated in the developed world and consequently two languages are considered a nuisance, three languages uneconomic and many languages absurd. In multilingual countries, many languages are facts of life; any restriction in the choice of language is a nuisance; and one language is not only uneconomic, it is absurd (Pattanayak 1984: 82).

It is significant that when Professor R. N. Srivastava of the University of Delhi wrote a Preface to a collection of Debi's articles on language, culture and education in multilingual India (Pattanayak 1991), he stressed the significance of Debi insisting that Western theories of language and linguistics are inappropriate in Third World contexts, and invalid when they claim to be free of ideological presuppositions. What is therefore needed is critical linguistics. Srivastava continues:

Critical linguistics builds the perspective to the study of language from within. It is centred around the ethos that comes into being from within the core of reality. It rejects the process of theory-building that is situation-neutral or derivative of some other theories [...] drawn from the monolingual situation. [...] Even such basic notions like ‘dialect’, ‘standard’, ‘mother-tongue’, etc., as defined in standard textbooks of linguistics, are unable to find their operational significance and applicational relevance in our real verbal situation’ (Srivastava 1991, viii).

He is confident that Debi's scholarship can serve to make research critical and true to the Indian reality. In this sense, work that claims to be critical and tries to ‘deconstruct’ languages by tracing some of the misguided linguistic language naming of missionaries (e.g. Pennycook and Makoni 2005) runs the risk of depriving oppressed minorities of their linguistic identity and of denying them the opportunity to assert their language rights. This is the opposite of what Debi's scholarship and active professional life stood and stands for.

Debi's introduction to his 1981 book decries how

the destruction of mother tongues represents a situation of language imperialism, wherein the dominant and the standard wears the badge of privilege and acts as the passport to rank, status and wealth (Pattanayak 1981, xiii).

Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas (2010) note that the neoliberal tendency is towards homogenisation. They continue (*ibid.*, 327-328):

Homogenisation reduces or eliminates cultural and linguistic diversity; diversity is seen as preventing integration and leading to a ‘clash of civilisations’. ... Education authorities in many countries work with similar perceptions: if children were to be taught through the medium of their mother tongues, they would be segregated from each other, they would not learn to know each other,

to live together, and they could not learn each others' languages and cultures. This would inevitably lead to conflict.

Debi has captured these unfounded threats in the following quotes:

While Weinstein, an eminent political scientist looking at the American structure asks "how much diversity can this structure tolerate?", a person in a Third World country must ask "how much uniformity can that structure tolerate?" ... The Western view is linear and binary, whereas the Eastern is cyclical and spiral. However, the westernized eastern elites, who are in charge of planning, follow essentially the Western worldview (Pattanayak 1991: 31).

The unjust economic system that Debi exposes in many of his articles, became entrenched with the neoliberal economic policies that have been progressively implemented since the 1980s, and the corporate world's manipulation of global finance, which the Indian government chose to opt into. The result is that the social and economic injustices that Debi has kept denouncing have been intensified in India, just as they have been in the USA and UK (see, e.g. Wilkinson and Pickett 2010 whom Debi no doubt would completely agree with).

Political scientists in the developing Third World, tutored in the theory and methodology of the social science of the West, also join the chorus and repeat ad nauseam that plurality is a threat to the stability of the fragile State. They forget that in these countries freedom is more fragile than the State ... It is inconceivable that there was a single language for all human beings at any time since human societies were formed. Multiplicity and diversity are the characteristics of nature (Pattanayak 1981a: 3, vii).

Many Western social scientists in development studies are now discussing 'fragile states', three decades after Debi's insightful analysis – but still repeating the same mantras about plurality as a threat. In order to escape the 'fragility', these states, for instance in Africa, are supposed to let themselves be managed towards 'good governance' and 'democracy' of the Western type, with neoliberal 'modernisation', progress, and homogenisation as a means – and more conflicts as one of the results.

'The devaluation and delegitimation of local knowledges are symptomatic of the knowledge feudalism and triumphalist hegemony of secular, white-supremacist, capitalist modernity, which epitomizes the inherent coloniality of Western knowledge', Ahmed Kabel writes (email, 2010). In order to make a break with the colonisation of knowledge, Susanne Pérez (2009: 213-214) uses Catherine Walsh's proposed construction of an 'epistemic interculturality' as a tool for reflection in a Peruvian programme in Indigenous teacher training sessions that she has participated in planning and conducting:

(...) the construction of new epistemological frames that incorporate and negotiate occidental and non-occidental knowledges, indigenous but also black (and their theoretical and lived bases, from the past but also from the present), always maintaining as fundamental the necessity of confronting coloniality of power to which these knowledges have been submitted (Walsh 2004: 4, quoted in Pérez 2009: 213).

One of Debi's strengths has been to legitimate and universalise local knowledges, while being deeply aware of and incorporating truly universal knowledge from other places (geographic as well as spiritual).

If one has to choose just one theme where Debi's thinking is more profound and fundamental than anything else written globally, it would in my view be his wide-ranging argumentation about the need for mother-tongue-based multilingual education for Indigenous, tribal, minority and minoritised (ITM) children. It starts with concrete still deep philosophical understanding of the role of language for the child's emotional, cognitive and social development, e.g.:

Language enables one to label objects, events and relationships and establish kinship with the world around. Language enables to question and argue and thus to define and clarify concepts. Language enables to think and speculate, propelling one to create and innovate resulting in new knowledge, new experience and new interpretation....

The early socialisation function of the mother tongue is not only limited to primary family communication, but through naming, establishing balanced relationship with the immediate environment and through kinship establishing a network of social relationship. Thus the flora, fauna, colours and rhythms, naming of which enables the child to creatively explore and develop sensitivity to the physical world and naming the kin categories which provide three dimensionality to the child's life while promising security through interdependence give a psychic depth to the mother tongue. All these and the myths transmitted through grandmother's tales, feasts and fasts, depiction of saints, gods and demons through religious and secular performances and their depiction in temples, churches and mosques or other, secular motifs, provide cultural anchor to the child. Once the child is thus securely anchored in his culture, he can adopt or adapt other cultures and develop a balanced personality....

A sudden break from the language through which one receives early socialisation and which is the language of early concept formation, with which one dreams, speculated, argued and discovered one's identity, leads to rootlessness, anomie, alienation and isolation. It disturbs the harmonious relationship with the environment and creates gaps and blind spots in perception and cognition. It creates complexes and leads to emotional disturbances. Emotions, when manipulated, result in cataclysmic effects on society. When a language substitutes another in the domains of education, administration and wider communication, it creates a sense of inferiority complex among the speakers of the substituted language towards their own language, it inhibits questioning, and everything given in the new language is accepted as superior, modern and true knowledge. With the passage of time, anything written in the substituted language is considered not so modern, unscientific and folksy. Instead of promoting logical thinking, the new language thus hits at the root of development of scientific temper (Pattanayak, 1988).

Debi continues the theme with presenting and analysing the arguments that have been (and are still being) put forward FOR the subtractive assimilation-oriented genocidal

dominant-language-medium education that most ITM children all over the world, including India, are still forced to accept. Debi then presents (in the article “Meeting arguments against MT”) a systematic, solid, research-based and very detailed list of economic, political, social and educational counterarguments AGAINST the “intellectual slavery” that is a result of the presently most common education system, regardless of whether the dominant educational medium is an Indian language, foreign to the ITM child, or English: “Ignoring the mothertongue or replacing it by another does not only result in intellectual impoverishment and emotional sterility in the individual, but cultural atrophy in a social group”. “English like other colonial languages, creates intellectual bonded labour”. But in addition, he also outlines, again in great and concrete detail, how the education of ITM children should be organised at all levels, ending at the university level. There is a wealth of examples and stories. In Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010 we show that the present submersion education denies the children the human right to education, and is genocidal educationally, psychologically, linguistically and sociologically, using *The United Nations International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (E793, 1948; <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>), especially two of its five definitions of genocide in its Article 2: “In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with *intent to destroy*, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: ... (b) *Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*; ... (e) *Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group* (emphases added). We also show that this education can be labelled a crime against humanity (ibid.). With examples from both India and elsewhere, Debi argued already in 1981 for the executive and judiciary to implement language rights. This exemplifies his capacity to develop a powerful intellectual argument and to stress that principles without implementation are valueless.

Had Debi succeeded in convincing the world, and India? Is it possible for solid research arguments to get through?

Julia Lovell writes in her review of Pankaj Mishra’s book *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (2012), rephrasing Mishra, about non-western voices that have been mute in anglophone accounts, ‘as if intellectual dynamism and creativity had lain solely with the modern west’ (2012: 38). Debi’s voice has not been muted in the west, but it has certainly not got heard to the extent that it deserves – therefore too, these volumes are overdue. But as with many other great thinkers in history, Debi’s thoughts and recommendations have not been followed in his own country either. Much of recent research and thinking in multilingual education, east and west, is continuing to reinvent the wheel that Debi has been writing and speaking about for the last half a century. Thus we are not speaking about scientific imperialism only, but also about decision makers all over the world who do not listen, or do not want to know about recommendations based on solid research – because these elites think, falsely, that it is in their interest to ignore them. At their peril, we have to add. Says Debi:

If Indian languages were used for conveying contemporary ideas, the problem which seems insurmountable could be solved in no time. The question therefore is to devise mechanics to meet challenging problems rather than pose problems as lever for inaction.

The Anglophile intellectuals of this country ... equate teaching of English with education. They equate the 2 to 3 per cent of English knowing with the peoples of India.

In short, the English speaking elite who enjoy the benefits of English education and who have appropriated to themselves the responsibility of providing leadership to the society at large are the main sources of obstruction to the development of Indian languages.

Linking linguistic homogenisation through education to agricultural homogenisation, Debi argues:

As agriculture planners seek a solution through large farm technology, language planners seek solutions through dominant monolingualism. Language planners, like economic planners in the third world, do not see the interrelation between small landholdings and small zone communications, nor do they plan on the basis of existing realities of smallholdings and multiple languages. They seek a uniform solution to primarily diverse situations which results in limited elite formation, greater illiteracy and brain drain from rural to urban and developing to developed countries.

The false focus on education through the medium of a single language is not merely the bane of education in India in the 21st century. It is a major problem worldwide, with increasing numbers of children in Africa being confronted with 'English-only' schooling; with the mushrooming of English-medium elite schools in Asia, the Middle East and continental Europe that educate a more or less monolingual elite and prepare them for the international baccalaureate; and with English increasingly used in higher education worldwide, often at the expense of local languages.

Until recently, there have been too few empirical scientific studies about the results of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE). And very few reported studies have originated in countries outside the West. Now this is slowly changing, and some of the most innovative and theoretically and empirically most interesting studies are emerging from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

To return to some of the claims about mother tongues, linguistic diversity, and so called modernisation, is it not true, then, that ties to local identity-building-blocks such as languages prevent people from partaking in the 'global' world?. This is another myth that Debi has also counterated in his writings. In a fantastic book called *New World of Indigenous Resistance. Noam Chomsky and voices from North, South and Central America* (Meyer & Maldonado 2010), Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado criticizes Chomsky (and this critique would be even harsher in relation to some of the western researchers mentioned above) for holding

the erroneous view that *comunalidad* inevitably reduces or seeks to reduce itself to that which is local. Or even worse, that it excludes anything from the outside, or anything global, regardless of how valuable, useful and necessary it might be. This view holds that those who appreciate communal ways and fight to strengthen them want to isolate their people from the world, and lock themselves up in a nonexistent world free of evil ... Isolation or purism is not at

all what the communalists have in mind. Rather, they focus on the need to equip their people to circulate in the world, confident in their identity and with a strong sense of belonging to their community. In other words, they strive to overcome the vulnerability and dependence generated by postmodern nomadism (Maldonado 2010: 368).

Debi would agree. And mother tongues are mostly an important aspect of that strong identity. Still,

Mother tongues as concepts and claiming them is seen as ‘outmoded’ (Canagarajah 2005: 443), ‘irrelevant’, ‘quaint’ or ‘antedeluvian’ (May 2005: 321) and worse. By negating or ridiculing mother tongues as a concept these researchers may support the invisibilisation of ITM mother tongues in precisely those areas where the transfer of ITM languages to the next generations is decided, e.g. schools. At the same time, these non-nominalising myth-maker researchers often pose as (leftist and/or post-post-modern) advocates for Indigenous peoples and/or minorities (Skutnabb-Kangas 2009: 46).

Jodi Byrd, citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, discusses the defamation of native voices in postcolonial scholarship, through casting Indigenous peoples as ‘relics or remnants of a distant, conquered past’ (2006: 83). She sees postcolonial theories as ‘situated on a precipice between providing a forum to consider the colonization of Indigenous People on a global, international scale and becoming yet another means through which Western academia discredits and invisibilizes indigenous world-views’ (ibid., 84). The theory ‘appears depoliticized in its emphasis on the “post” and its declaration that “the era of formal colonialism is over”’ (ibid., 86) whereas ‘the Native decolonial struggles in the USA are still ongoing’ (ibid.), with a federal policy that ‘systematically dismantles the sovereignty and treaty rights of Native nations, forcibly appropriates their lands, and degrades Native cultures and languages, through forced assimilation, relocation, and allotment’ (ibid.).

One can discern a similar policy towards ITMs in most parts of the world, with states and/or transnational companies forcibly appropriating ITM lands, and preventing the intergenerational transfer of their languages, helped by the partial legitimization of the forced assimilation by many researchers. Byrd pleads for a transformation of “the postcolonial to account for those processes through which the discursive colonialism of Native peoples remain intact even within theories developed to challenge Western hegemony” (ibid.).

Debi has in his work and writings been transformative in every sense of the word. The powerful insights that he brought to the academic world, which challenged Western orthodoxies, are now becoming mainstream worldwide. His profound, subtle, humane influence will live on, and become still better known through these volumes.

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