Linguistic Landscape of Howrah: A Comparative Study of Two Regions in a Multilingual City

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Abstract
This paper aims to study the linguistic landscape of multilingual Howrah, comparing two regions specifically, in order to analyse the variations between areas speaking different languages. The two regions have been chosen such that one is occupied by speakers of the majority language Bangla, while the other is inhabited by non-Bangla communities. These minorities exist in the face of extreme linguistic nationalism by the majority Bengali community. For the linguistic landscape study, all posters, billboards, advertisements, shop names, graffiti on walls, official signboards, traffic signs, address plates, building names, and all other static text were considered, regardless of size. It was assumed that Bangla and English would be the most frequently sighted languages in both the areas, with lower presence of Bangla in the non-Bangla region. The study confirmed this idea, wherein Bangla, English, Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit were found in the study areas, with the predominance of English and Bangla. The non-Bangla area had an overwhelmingly high number of English signs, which also points towards the significance of English in contemporary Indian society.
Linguistic Landscape of Howrah: A Comparative Study of Two Regions in a Multilingual City

Tanya Kole*

1. Introduction

This paper explores multilingualism in Howrah, India, by studying the linguistic landscape of two regions in the city. These study areas have been selected such that one area is primarily inhabited by speakers of the dominant language, Bangla, while the other has majority non-Bangla communities. The aim is to draw a comparison between the linguistic landscape observed in the two places, in order to determine the social position of the languages used in each region.

Linguistic landscaping is a fairly new concept, with its first official mention in Landry and Bourhis’s (1997:23) seminal paper involving French-speaking students in Canada. According to them, linguistic landscape refers to the “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry and Bourhis 1997:23). A study of the linguistic landscape would thus include all available instances of language present in a given environment. It encompasses all public signs that contain writing on them, inclusive of commercial, government-sanctioned, and community-made signs.

2. Language in West Bengal

West Bengal was the seventh-most migrant-rich state in the country in 2011 (2011 Census of India) and is home to many migrants and their children. Thus, a myriad of languages are spoken there. Of these, Bangla, as the official language of the state, is the dominant language spoken in the city of Howrah, with 84.99 % of the population speaking it as their mother tongue (2011 Census of India). Out of the remaining languages, the most significant are Hindi, the official language of the nation, and English, which is also constitutionally permitted to be used for official purposes (Constitution of India, 1950:212). Other than that, Urdu, Oraon, Santhali, and Nepali are also languages with a sizable population (2011 Census of India) due to the aforementioned influx of migrants and its impact on the respective speech communities. As such, it is fairly easy to identify Bangla, Hindi, and Urdu speaking regions in Howrah.

2.1. Hindi as a Threat

In order to understand the significance of languages used in the study area, it is necessary to address the role of linguistic extremism prevalent in the state as well as at the centre. The effort by the central government to encourage nationalism through a unified language has existed ever since Independence, and makes itself evident in the Constitution itself. In 1950, with the adoption of the Constitution of India, Hindi was made the official language of the country, while allowing English to be used for official purposes for 15 years, during which time the people were expected to settle into the usage of Hindi. However, the country saw violent protests in 1963 in West Bengal and in the Southern states, triggering the formation of the Kothari Commission in 1964 and its three-language policy in education. As part of this policy, schools in all states within India were required to teach three languages to the students, wherein Hindi was recommended as a compulsory language in all states. The Kothari Commission Report reads:

Hindi: Every effort should be made to promote the development of Hindi. In developing Hindi as the link language, due care should be taken to ensure that it will serve, as provided for in Article 351 of the Constitution, as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India. The establishment in non-Hindi States, of colleges and other institutions of higher education which use Hindi as the medium of education should be encouraged.

(Ministry of Education 1966:xiii-xiv)

Attempts to standardize and spread usage of Hindi have seen a new surge with the advent of contemporary Hindu nationalism at the centre, endorsed by the majority political party. In opposition

*I would like to thank Subhajit Kole and Chiranjar Karmakar for their help in taking photographs of signs along Belilious Road. I would also like to thank Soham Adhikari for their assistance in counting signs, as well as their constant feedback.
to this, states in the South and the East have adopted linguistic nationalism as a means to protect their culture and identity.

2.2. Bengali Linguistic Nationalism

In an attempt to oppose the religious nationalism at the centre, which includes both the imposition of Hinduism and Hindi, extremists in Bengal have adopted the idea of linguistic nationalism to protect their own language and culture (see Gupta 2019). In doing so, they perpetuate the same policy at the state level that the central government does at the centre. In addition, this nationalism is backed by the state government, as is evident from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s 2019 speech, where she stated, “বাংলায় থাকলে বাংলায় কথাটা বলতে হবে,” which translates to “If you stay in Bengal, you must also speak in Bangla” (Sengupta 2019). The teaching of Bangla at least as a second or a third language to all students has been mandated in all schools within the state, whether government-funded or private institutions (Banerjie 2017).

Extremist organizations have been gaining ground in the state, especially those based in Kolkata. One such organization, which claims to be non-communal and apolitical, states in its 30-point demand list:

Reading, writing and speaking Bengali must be pre-requisite for candidature of all government jobs in West Bengal (state, central and state/central undertaking organization). This has to be ascertained through both written and oral examination. 85% of such posts have to be reserved for the residents of this state (i.e. only for citizens who are voter of the state). There must be 8% reservation in all employment and tender generated by Central government/central government aided agencies for the resident of West Bengal (Bangla Pokkho, n.d.).

In answer, the West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company has incorporated a compulsory Bangla language section in its entrance examination for job-seekers, with Bangla Pokkho striving for all government agencies to do the same (Asiabet News Bangla 2021). There are rallies and protests in progress, now demanding 100% reservations for indigenous residents of Bengal in government job positions, and 90% in private ones, along with 90% in all educational institutions, practically attempting to wipe out every language other than standardized Bangla (News 18 2021). The group’s leader, Garga Chattopadhyay believes that “sons of the soil” must be given reservation privileges even in a region where they hold an overwhelming majority.

Regional language proficiency for entry to government jobs for indigenous residents of states is common in both the Northern Hindi-speaking belt as well as in Southern India, including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and recently, Tamil Nadu. However, these latter states are popularly known to be protective of their linguistic identity and the move suggests an attempt to defend their language as well as to appease the unemployed youth in the state (Banchariya 2021), with West Bengal following suit. The “sons of the soil” concept is not unheard of either, with Maharashtra incorporating it, along with Madhya Pradesh proclaiming that jobs will only be given to “children of the state” (Siddique 2020). However, if every state makes reservations for original inhabitants, and conducts compulsory language proficiency exams, the country gets reduced to a group of ethnolinguistically separate units, rather than a unified nation. Arguably, a more inclusive approach would be to allow all aspirants to take the examination, followed by intensive regional language training on clearing the same (Banchariya 2021).

3. Linguistic Landscape of Howrah

3.1. Study Area

Two streets that are inhabited by two different communities have been chosen for this study. As such, the first, Panchanantala Road, is a Bengali-dominated area. Both the landscape and the soundscape point towards the predominance of Bangla and English, including various Bangla-medium schools and clubs. Although it is mainly a residential area, numerous iron works are present, pointing in part, to a crumbling iron and steel industry that used to thrive here (see Mazumdar 2015). It is a Hindu-majority region with the presence of a few roadside temples. The languages found were Bangla, English, Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit.

The second street, Bélilious Road, is populated by minority communities, usually inter-state migrants, who do not speak Bangla as their first language. It is situated towards the outskirts of the main Howrah town, with some of its growth based on job opportunities through the Howrah Rail-
way Station and the associated steel industries. It is a residential as well as an industrial area, with the presence of steel works clearly evident. Although this industry is on a steady decline, this road continues to be a hub of iron and steel workshops (see Ghosh 1980). There is a sizable Muslim population, with a few mosques present. The languages found were Bangla, English, Hindi, and Urdu.

3.2. Methodology

For the study, the entire lengths of both the roads were traversed and pictures were taken of all signs present using a phone camera or a GoPro. This included posters, billboards, advertisements, shop names, graffiti on walls, official signboards, traffic signs, address plates, building names, and all other static text, regardless of size. Vehicles and other moving objects were not included.

A sign was categorized as multilingual if it

(1) contained more than one script
(2) contained direct transliterations from another language if the translation for the word or phrase does not exist in the target language or is not in daily use.

Figure 1: An example of a monolingual sign.

Figure 2: An example of a multilingual sign.

Figure 1 shows a monolingual sign; the entirety of the text is in Bangla in the Bangla script. Figure 2 shows a multilingual sign; it is an advertisement wherein all the text is in the Roman script, but the words are in a mix of Hindi and English, with a pun on the word ‘bowl’ that would only make sense when seen through a multilingual lens. The languages found on the multilingual signs were also noted.
While this paper draws some inspiration from Backhaus 2006 about multilingualism in Tokyo, the methods used have been altered to fit the Indian context. In Backhaus’s paper, signs were counted as multilingual as long as they contained any language other than or in addition to Japanese. However, this method would not be effective in this study, since unlike in Japan, there are up to three official languages to address here: English and Hindi at the central level, and Bangla at the state level. It was hence important to consider each language individually while conducting this study. Many signs have phone numbers, abbreviations or dates written in English with otherwise monolingual content. Unlike in Backhaus 2006, these have been counted under multilingual signs, since a few signs were identified where this information was presented in the respective language.

3.3. Observations

A total of 1076 signs were studied in Deshpran Sasmal Road, of which 287 or 26.67% were identified as multilingual (see Table 1). A majority of the signs (at overall 78.35%) contained English or Roman script, with 558 solely English signs and 285 multilingual signs that contained English or Roman script, making up nearly all of the multilingual signs. 220 monolingual and 236 multilingual signs containing Bangla (42.38% of all signs) were observed, making up most of the multilingual signs alongside English. There were 80 or 7.43% signs containing Hindi, while Urdu and Sanskrit are in one sign each. Both were transliterations in a different script. The Urdu sign was a shop name written in Roman script, while the Sanskrit one was a small prayer written on a roadside Hindu temple in Bangla script. All traffic signs were either in English or had no text at all, with only an illustration, presumably for the sake of universal access. Three schools were found: all three had Bangla as their medium of instruction, and their names were written in Bangla, or a combination of Bangla and English. For example, one of the schools was called Mission Bodhoday International, wherein the word bodhoday was in Bangla, while the rest was in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>78.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangla</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>42.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1076</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Languages on signs along Deshpran Sasmal Road (Bangla majority region).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1028</td>
<td>91.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangla</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>20.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1126</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Languages on signs along Belilious Road (non-Bangla region).

In the non-Bangla Belilious Road, 1126 signs were studied, of which 224 or 19.89% were categorised as multilingual (see Table 2). An overwhelming 91.30% of all signs contained English or Roman script. This is in great contrast with the Bangla majority street, with only 78.35% Eng-
lish signs. Bangla signs make up 20.16%, which again is a huge disparity compared to the other region, which is inevitable since the area is mainly occupied by non-Bangla speakers, usually migrants. Hindi sees a drop at 6.66%, but Urdu sees a drastic rise at 3.11% compared to just 1 sign or 0.09% in the Bangla region. The educational institutions found in this area are all labelled in English even if the medium of instruction includes Urdu. This region has a relatively high non-Bengali Muslim population who use Urdu, hence the presence of so many Urdu signs.

As was anticipated, the occurrence of Bangla on signs was far lower in the non-Bangla region, with a wide prevalence of English instead. The overwhelming usage of English on signs is quite in contrast to the speaking habits of the people, most of whom do not use English as their first language or mother tongue. Arguably, the English signs cater to the growing generation, who are expected to be English-educated in an urban area. In addition, the use of the Roman script is common in electronic gadgets like smartphones and television, and is a familiar sight for most. Given the diversity of languages spoken in the state as well as the country in general, English often serves as a bridge or a link language for inter-community interaction. With the lack of an overarching national language for the country, English has gained its place as the *lingua franca*. It is now taught in schools all over India, and serves to provide greater inclusiveness (Iyer and Ramachandran 2019), also allowing a migrant-rich city to thrive seamlessly.

### 3.3.1. Targeted Usage of Languages

As Blommaert and Maly (2016) suggest, the placement and usage of language on signs have very specific intentions, and point at communication within a community. Certain issues were addressed only in the language expected of their intended audience. For example, posters and boards protesting the killing of Anish Khan (see Singh 2022), a leftist student activist, were found in both places in Bangla and English (Figure 3), calling for other politically active individuals or student protesters, the latter of which would be English-educated college students. However, posters regarding the hijab protests in Karnataka found mention only in the non-Bangla Belilious Road, and only on monolingual Urdu boards (Figure 4), thus aimed only at those who could read it, presumably attempting to draw attention from the Muslim community in the region. The Anish Khan signs were thus made by political activists, for political activists, and the hijab protest posters were put up by members of the Muslim community for other members of the Muslim community.

![Figure 3: A poster calling for justice for Anish Khan.](image-url)
Figure 4: A monolingual Urdu poster about the Karnataka hijab protests.

In both places, many of the Hindi and Bangla monolingual signs observed were political campaigning posters, catering to the respective linguistic communities. The Trinamool Congress’s 2021 campaign for the state assembly elections was centred on the idea of portraying the current chief minister as a loyal daughter of Bengal. Their slogan read, “বাংলা নিজের মেয়েকেই চায়,” which translates to “Bengal wants its own daughter,” thus furthering the established insider-outsider narrative (Ani, 2021). As such, all signs with this slogan on it were in Bangla. Meanwhile, posters and billboards in English or Hindi had no trace of the idea. Hence, the idea of Banerjee being Bengal’s daughter was designed to cater only to the Bengalis, providing them with an in-group feeling, while those who did not understand the language were consciously left out.

4. Conclusion

With rapid urbanization, more and more migrants are beginning to settle in the city, bringing with them their own languages, adding to the existing linguistic diversity. However, against the backdrop of the aforementioned Bengali extremism and gatekeeping of government jobs and education, such migrants and non-Bangla speakers are pushed to the periphery of the town. Even in a non-Bangla or English region, any language but these two form a tiny minority of public signs. In addition, in 2016, the Ministry of Minority Affairs sent the state government a detailed questionnaire regarding issues of linguistic minorities in the state and related recommendations, but it was met with no response. As mentioned before, the state government, as well as many who possess extremist sentiments towards the Bangla language, have been pursuing a path that would lead to the eradication of minority languages and encourage migrants to be driven out. However, without such migrants, we not only lose diversity in the state, but also lack the essential services and industries that thrive only due to migrant presence. In this light, it is important to preserve and increase awareness about languages used by minority communities. Iyer and Ramachandran (2019) suggest that English should be further cultivated as a lingua franca by developing a robust English language curriculum. Encouraging English in schools as well as in government jobs removes the first language advantage from everyone, since most people in India do not use English as their mother-tongue. However, it gives birth to new problems with respect to linguistic identity, wherein children are compelled to learn a supposedly foreign language instead of their native tongue (Devi 2017). This could further lead to language shift among minority linguistic communities and cause extinction of their language. The topic of language planning in a country as linguistically vast as India is a tricky field, and further work is in order. This study aims to be a preliminary study in the linguistic landscape of this enormously diverse city, and will subsequently be built upon by further research.
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