The politics of language: the case of Hyderabad, *Decolonial Subversions*, and Esperanto in an Indian University

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Monika begins. Thinking of linguistic justice and decolonisation brings me back to one humid summer afternoon – it must have been around 2010-11 – when, sitting in the living room of an apartment-block in the South Indian city of Hyderabad, I was engrossed in my first Hindi lesson. Having taught German to Indian students myself, the teacher's immersive approach, whereby he communicated primarily in the language I aimed to learn, felt familiar and disorienting at the same time.

By the time I started Hindi classes, I had already lived in the bustling, multi-religious and multi-ethnic capital of Telangana State for a couple years, easily getting by with a combination of English and German at work and English during everyday life. Learning Hindi was thus not dictated by necessity but, rather, by the desire to forego the unjust advantage I enjoyed simply because I happened to fluently speak the lingua franca that many of the street vendors, shop owners, rickshaw drivers and colleagues I interacted with had to adopt so as not to be excluded from the increasing number of business and educational matters conducted in English. While my fluency in English – as a native German-Italian speaker – is similarly a consequence of the discursive hegemony exercised by the language, when taken in concomitance with my skin colour, it undeservedly makes me a beneficiary of the economic and political (in other words, colonial) power attached to the concurrence of whiteness and English.

A remarkable nexus between identity-politics and language emerges when appreciating that, within South India, Hyderabad is an

exception in view of the popularity that Hindi enjoys among its citizens. In fact, whereas Hindi, in addition to regional languages, is mostly spoken in the North of the country (specifically in the so-called 'Hindi Belt', a linguistic region encompassing various states), in the South local languages and English prevail. Hyderabad's large Hindi-speaking population is a result of the city's long and proud Muslim history – Hindi being mutually intelligible with Urdu, a language that plays an important role in shaping South Asian Muslim identities.

How peculiar the widespread diffusion of Hindi is to Hyderabad becomes evident when leaving the city for other places in Telangana, where conversing in a language other than the local Telugu or English is difficult. Indeed, Hindi, so pervasive in the North of India, has encountered considerable resistance among the peoples of the South who, on account of the cultural and political domination historically exercised by the regions of the Hindi Belt, have in postcolonial times favoured English as an overarching means of communication among various states.

Curiously, the same opposition to another's cultural hegemony that brings South India to favour English over Hindi, sustains the North's preference for Hindi over English, particularly since Mr. Modi has become India's prime minister. However, while the preference for English in the South is primarily an act of resistance to the cultural supremacy of the North, the predilection for Hindi in the North merges its anticolonial rhetoric with contentious homogenising and fundamentalist traits.

Through a brief illustration of the distinctive cultural-linguistic history of Hyderabad, it is possible to envision that complex politics animate also the more than 19 500 mother tongues spoken in India, and languages generally. At the same time, the city's intermingled and peaceful coexistence of its Telugu, Hindi and English speaking population

is testament to the fact that cultural representation and linguistic justice cannot be delinked from one another, but enhance and complement each other.

It is with the intent to honour multilingual and decolonial narratives such as this, that Dr Romina Istratii and I have established the publishing platform *Decolonial Subversions* in March 2020. As outlined in our [Manifesto](#), we wish to overcome persistent dynamics in the production, expression and validation of knowledge that consistently reaffirm the centrality of western, Anglophone, patriarchal and ableist parties. In order to bring to the fore historically marginalised voices, we depart from mainstream standards of communication (encouraging contributions in visual and acoustic formats, in addition to written ones) and welcome submissions in any language from people of all walks of life, as long as they further the cause of decolonisation. We expect contributors to significantly reference sources that forego domineering voices and invite reflexive approaches, while resorting to a rigorous yet flexible (open or blind) peer-review process, subscribing to an Open Access publishing model to overcome financial barriers faced by low- and middle-income contributors, and delegating editorial leadership to colleagues working outside mainstream centres of knowledge production as and when possible. We are very grateful for the financial support of the [Esperantic Studies Foundation](#), which has contributed significantly toward achieving these goals, financing the establishment of the online platform – developed by our collaborators in India.

Thus far, *Decolonial Subversions* has connected a growing community of friends and colleagues committed to decolonising knowledge and modes of being. Among these is Giridhar Rao, whom I have been lucky to work with again after many years – this time not as

underachieving Hindi student and engaged language teacher, but as scholars dedicated to the causes of language justice and decolonisation.

Giridhar continues. The invitation by Monika and Romina to contribute an article to *Decolonial Subversions* was a welcome opportunity to showcase some initiatives at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India. These initiatives are courses and projects that build on India's multilingualism (that Monika has already mentioned). The initiatives aim to enable students in our MA programmes to develop educational practices that promote linguistic and social justice in school and higher education. Not surprisingly, many of the ideas animating the Esperanto movement (for example those mentioned in the [Prague Manifesto](#)) are natural allies of the aims of the courses and projects at the University.

For instance, consider the proposition that multilingual education is necessary in India: first, for effective learning; second, for livelihood; third, to protect linguistic human rights, especially those of the most vulnerable in society; and fourth, for democratic citizenship. A course such as "Esperanto and Linguistic Democracy" addresses just these aspects.

In this course, an understanding of linguistic diversity, sources of linguistic power, and the multiple levels at which languages operate – all matters that Monika has touched upon – are a starting point for asking a related set of questions:

- What features at each level must an effective international language have?
- What constitutes an *easy* language?
- What is a *fair* language system for a multilingual context?
- What are the linguistic aspects of decolonising the mind?

These are some of the questions students ask about what language teachers can learn from Esperanto. More details about the language courses and initiatives at our University are available in the article in *Decolonial Subversions*, "[Linguistic Human Rights and Multilingual Education: Report from an Indian University](#)".

To conclude, there is a profound alignment between the aims of the project of *Decolonial Subversions* and the ideals and practices of the Esperanto movement.