

Tyranny of Language

Condemned to silence

Our contributor in Karachi, [Md. Ali Khan](#), has alerted me to what seems to be a fascinating book: *The Tyranny of Language in Education* by Zubeida Mustafa published by [Ushba Books](#). I'd love to read the book but trying to order it here in Australia has been a reality check on globalization: mission impossible! So, I've had to content myself with the summary of the book that is available on [the author's blog](#). The book's central argument seems to be that language choice in education in Pakistan – be it the choice of the mother tongue, the national language, or English – is ideologically laden and not primarily, or not at all, driven by educational considerations. Language choices in education have thus become an obstacle to improving education in Pakistan.

Without having read the book and without knowing the Pakistan context well, the argument certainly makes a lot of sense to me. Having just co-edited a special issue of the [International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism](#) devoted to “Linguistic Diversity and Social Inclusion,” my co-editor, [Kimie Takahashi](#), and I were continuously struck by the tyranny exerted by prescriptive language choices in multilingual contexts. As such, our special issue ended up documenting more **exclusion** than **inclusion**. And the most inclusive spaces were those that were linguistically least dogmatic.

By far the most inclusive space described in the pages of [that special issue](#) is an evangelical church in Canada catering mostly to Chinese migrants. As the researcher, [Huamei Han](#), describes it, language choice was a non-issue in that context. Where migrants in other contexts, well-documented in research from around the globe, often find themselves condemned to silence because of their lack of familiarity with a narrowly prescribed “power code,” the members of that church are extremely pragmatic when it comes to language choice. Based on the assumption that language choice is secondary to the overall aim of serving god, the church's inclusive linguistic practices include ample code-switching and the legitimization of all codes as long as they serve the common purpose. Fellows were assigned speaking roles not on the basis of their proficiency but on the basis of the fact that they were good Christians. All these practices which draw on a language ideology of pragmatism where it is not language that matters but the common goals of Christian ministry and service made newcomers not only feel included but also provided them with valuable practice opportunities that supported their language learning, too.

Similarly to the language ideologies operating in [another highly inclusive space we've featured on Language-on-the-Move before, the Central Library in Vienna](#), the church described by Han demonstrates that it is possible to escape the tyranny of language in linguistically diverse contexts. The question is how civil society can prioritize common causes over a focus on restrictive language ideologies in a way that is similar to the prioritisation of Christianity in this church?



Han, Huamei (2011). Social inclusion through multilingual ideologies, policies and practices: a case study of a minority church International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 14 (4), 383-398