Anatomy of language shaming

By Ingrid Piller  October 16, 2017  Language shaming

This latest exploration in language shaming examines a language shame campaign on the internet and shows how it is used as a tool to suppress political debate and women’s public speech while generalizing a linguistic inferiority complex.

The shaming - what happened?

On June 10, 2011, the then Minister for Health and Population of Nepal, the Honorable Dharma Shila Chapagain, addressed the UN High-Level Meeting on AIDS in New York. The 7-minute speech was live-streamed on the UN’s multimedia channel and an excerpt was then shown on Kathmandu-based TV station Kantipur. From there a 4-minute clip made its way onto Youtube, where it was titled “Nepali Stupid Speech at UN”. This prompted many Internet users to comment: the sociolinguist Krishna Bal Sharma, in whose 2014 article I first learned about the incident, counted 603 comments in April 2013.

The comments heaped scorn on the way the speech was delivered, as in the following examples:

- in that forum u are allowed to speak any language not just english but she choose to disgrace our country
- Wtf bitch... A kid from primary level has a better English than u.
- Fuck this is why i’m not proud to say i’m nepali

(13) its really a great shame, deshko nak nai kati gadhi le ((You ass disgraced the country))
(14) nepalko beijat ((Nepal’s shame))......she’s dam bitch....
(15) thukka!!!!!!! yesta le Nepal ko pratinidhi kasari garchan... desh kai ghor beijat... ((Embarrassing!!! How can people like her represent Nepal? ... country’s great shame))
(16) f*** u bitch.... u let us (NEPAL) down.
(17) हे भ्रमणाल!! "काली अक्षर मैसी वसंबर". Yesto angreji bolero ल हेर, आफनो त बिजेत भ्रमो-भ्रमो, सारा नेपाली र नेपालको पनि बिजेत. यस्तै- यस्तै मान्चेहरुका कारणले नेपालको बद्दल भएको छ लियौ!!.
 ((OMG! “Black letters are like a buffallo”. Speaking this kind of English, see, she let her prestige down. It’s a shame for the Nepalis and Nepal))
(18) thukka! kasto yeti jabo english pani ramro sanga na bolna aako! nepali ko yestai para le ta dhoti haru le hepcha ni! ((Embarrassing! You can’t even speak English well! That’s why Indians dominate the Nepalis))

Shaming comments (Source: Sharma, 2014, p. 24)
• Its like letting a nursery kid to read those paragraphs..shame on you...
• very shameful speech.
• what's this? it is just a shame for all nepalese
• really fucking speech shame on

From these few examples, it is obvious that the comments are vile and constitute an example of language shaming par excellence.

The shamed speech – what was the content?

(22) yo kt le jpt english bolvo bhane kuire haru lai daya lagera education ko lagi kehi garlan bhan thanera yestto chartikala dekhaye ko hola natra yesto Nepali ko ijbhat ko dagiya why flying. dhait thuikka.... she sucks to be nepali
(‘She thinks that if she speaks poor English, Whites will be sympathetic to her and donate some money for Nepal’s education. She is putting scar on Nepal’s prestige. Embarrassing….. She sucks to be Nepali’)

(23) कसरी हुन्न एस्ट पलि मनी? एस्ट त मनी त्यह पलि कसरी हुन्न देशको प्रगती? देशको कितेत
(‘How do people like her become ministers? How can our country progress with such English? Disgraced the entire country’)

(24) hahahaha Stupid nepalis! And they dream of prosperous Nepal with such ministers!
(25) we Nepali indians must help nepal. nepal is so poor. It is our responsibility to donate money to nepal govt.

Shaming comments (Source: Sharma, 2014, p. 26)

pretend, if you can’t do it. You are embarrassing Nepalese, your party, and making a fool yourself…"

The speech presented an outline of the HIV situation in Nepal, including public health measures and challenges related to the disease. The Minister used the opportunity to particularly highlight gender inequality as a key issue in HIV transmission and sexual and reproductive health more generally:

Women and girls are still the most affected group. In this context, there is a need to fight against gender inequalities, insufficient access to healthcare and services, and all forms of discrimination and violence, including sexual and gender based violence and exploitation. We must ensure their sexual and reproductive health. (Quoted from the official transcript of the speech available from the UN website)

The shamee – who was shamed?

When Minister Chapagain spoke about gender inequality, she knew what she was talking about from personal experience. Her personal story can be traced from The Nepal Papers edited by Mandira Sharma and Seira
Tamang.

Chapagain was born in the late 1970s in a village in Jhapa District in eastern Nepal and discovered from a young age that women and girls were not valued: one of four girls, her father divorced her mother when she failed to bear him a son; and although her mother made sure she could attend school, her education remained patchy and came to an end in her teens. Unsurprisingly, given that Nepal’s large gender literacy gap has only started to close in the 2000s. This is the lesson about women’s status that Chapagain learned in childhood:

It was tiring and painful to be a woman in the village and I was looking for a way out. [...] I felt that as women, my mother, my sisters and I were not wanted. That kind of torture haunt you at night, makes you want to take revenge. (quoted from Sharma & Tamang, 2016)

As a way out, Chapagain joined Nepal’s Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) in her late teens and became a guerilla fighter. By her mid-20s she had distinguished herself and risen to the rank of district-in-charge for Morang District in southeast Nepal. In 2002 she was arrested together with her six-month-old baby. The following five years in prison left their mark on Chapagain: as a consequence of the torture she suffered, she developed chronic health problems, including breathing difficulties and inability to stand and walk for extended periods.

During her five long years in various Nepali prisons, Chapagain was yet again confronted with gender inequality in the form of sexual violence against women.

‘The security forces didn’t care if they were old or young, they even raped a 64-year-old woman after killing her son,’ says Chapagain. ‘What kind of rules of war was the state following?’ She says that the then government saw the Maoists as enemies and wanted to destroy them, and sexual torture was one of the tools they used. (Sharma & Tamang, 2016)

When a Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed with the rebels in 2006, the Maoists became part of the government. In the elections of 2008, Chapagain was elected to parliament and served as Minister for Health and Population. And that’s how she came to deliver that speech at the UN in 2011.

The shamers – who did the shaming?

The shamers are an anonymous mass who individually hide behind their Youtube handles and social media pseudonyms. Sharma (2014) shows that most of them are Nepalis who are, however, not based in Nepal but outside the country. Because of the dire economic situation in Nepal – partly a result of the decade-long Maoist insurgency – Nepalis have been leaving their country in large numbers, and Sharma identifies two distinct streams of emigrants: low-skilled migrant workers whose preferred destinations are the Gulf countries, on the
one hand, and tertiary students on the other. The top destinations of the latter include other South-East Asian and Anglophone western countries.

On the basis of their location, commenters mostly seem to belong to the latter group. Shamers and shamee thus share the same nationality but differ on other dimensions:

- Location: based inside or outside Nepal
- Education: barely high-school educated vs tertiary educated
- Gender: to the degree that it is possible to tell, the majority of commenters seem to be male
- Political orientation: the Maoists’ socialist ideology is an explicit target of criticism and many commenters present it as the underlying cause of Chapagain’s poor English pronunciation.

The commonalities and differences between Chapagain and the commenters mean the delivery of the speech is not only represented as a cause of a shame for the speaker but also for the nation – a shame that the commenters themselves partly share (“it is just a shame for all nepalese”).

**Consequences of language shaming**

The consequences of a language shame campaign on the internet such as the one described here are twofold and affect both the shamee and the shamers.

To begin with, the shame campaign silences the actual content of the speech and suppresses political debate. Instead of engaging with the merits of the minister’s arguments and her politics, the focus is exclusively on the form in which her speech was delivered.

The fact that many of the comments take the form of specifically sexist insults (“Wtf bitch”) also demonstrates that linguistic shaming is not only about illegitimate speech but about illegitimate speakers. Language shaming is a way to keep people – here: rural women with little formal education – in their place; or to show them “their place” if they have risen above is, as Chapagain has.

Second, a shame campaign such as this one also serves to keep the overall hierarchy of global English in its place. While the commenters presumably believe themselves to speak better English than Chapagain, they do not set themselves up as model of “good English”. That model remains implicitly but firmly outside Nepal, presumably in
Anglophone western countries (although some commenters also compare the English of Indian politicians favorably to that of Nepali politicians).

This means that the shame campaign ultimately is as harmful to the shamers as it is to the shamed person: it perpetuates the linguistic and cultural inferiority complex that Franz Fanon identified as an inevitable consequence of colonial international relations:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. [...] Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, the culture of the mother country. (Fanon, 1967, p. 17f.)

**References**


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