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Mother Tongue as Global Politics

This Language Is Mine: US College Students Navigating Contradictions of “Mother Tongue” and Heritage Language

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I draw on both autoethnography and ethnographic research among college students studying their Heritage Language (HL)—or Heritage Language Learners (HLLs)—at a US university. I explore the felt contradictions and tensions that get voiced when attempting to navigate the uneasy relationship between two terms: “mother tongue” and HL when invoked either together or separately. While both terms can refer to the same language, the choice of one term over the other is used to emphasize different orientations. Whereas “mother tongue” is rooted in notions of kinship, HL constructs a relationship to the language that is largely external to a familial domain. As I suggest here, this distinction is made and collapses situationally as I and my research collaborators attempt to use them to explain the relationships among language and kinship, literacy, and religion.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo, me baso tanto en autoetnografía como en investigación etnográfica entre estudiantes universitarios analizando su lenguaje de herencia —o estudiantes de lenguajes de herencia (HLLs)— en una universidad estadounidense. Exploro las contradicciones y tensiones sentidas que se hacen oír cuando se intenta navegar las relaciones no fáciles entre dos términos: “lengua madre” y lenguaje de herencia cuando se invocan conjunta o separadamente. Mientras ambos términos se pueden referir al mismo lenguaje, la elección de un término sobre el otro es usado para enfatizar diferentes orientaciones. En tanto que la “lengua madre” está enraizada en nociones de parentesco, el lenguaje de herencia construye una relación con la lengua que es largamente externa al dominio familiar. Como sugiero aquí, esta distinción es hecha y colapsa situacionalmente como mis colaboradores en la investigación y yo intentamos usarlas para explicar las relaciones entre lenguaje y parentesco, alfabetismo y religión.

1 | Introduction

I have a purple composition notebook with scribbles of green crayon on the cover; inside are my childhood Arabic lessons. I remember running upstairs in my teacher’s home, where I would lie on the carpeted floor and write in the Arabic script. The

language lessons felt safe but never comfortable. The language didn’t sit with me; as I thought about it then, it wasn’t mine. For me, this was because Arabic was entangled with religion. Growing up in an Indian, mixed Hindu and Islamic household, I grew up speaking Hindi at home with both my parents but became literate in Arabic to read the Quran.

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On March 16, 2020, I returned to my family home at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a time filled with confusion and anxiety. My mother is a physician, and every day I was worried about her health. One night, something unexpected happened, which I recorded in my journal:

March 30, 2020

9:24 p.m.

Last night was weird. I rolled over, checked the time, and it was 4 a.m. All I could think about was how Mom had to wake up early and go to work the next morning. And then, I found myself praying. Not properly, but I started praying to Allah. I told him that I knew I didn't believe in him, and really doubted my faith, but if he's real, please, keep Mom safe. Halfway through, I was so shocked that I was praying; I didn't know what to do. So I just ended by saying a kalma and a surah and called it a night.

After years of struggling with my mixed-faith heritage, I opted to take a colloquial Levantine Arabic course as an act of both linguistic and cultural reclamation. This class ended up being my entry point into the different ways people can relate to a language. Having grown up speaking Hindi at home, I was nervous to claim a connection to Arabic. Yet as Anita Husen (2011, 3), educator and scholar of Arabic, writes, all Muslims are “heritage language learners of Arabic because of the relationship between language and Islam.” Regardless of ethnicity, learners can have an “emotional” connection to the language that is important to their “personal history” (Husen 2011, 3).

Questioning my relationship with Arabic and Hindi later expanded into a research project that I explored for my undergraduate thesis, which used autoethnography, ethnographic interviews, and classroom observations among college students at a US university to explore the many ways that the relationship between the terms Heritage Language (HL) and “mother tongue” gets felt and narrated as uneasy by participants—including myself. I choose to put “mother tongue” in quotation marks in this essay because the term is not institutionalized but instead gets mentioned in passing by participants, whereas HL, as a proper noun, is the institutionalized terminology used in university course listings for the learning environments that I talk about here. I begin with my own experiences not only because they shaped my positionality and investments as a “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1997) throughout my research and writing, but also because my experiences crucially afforded a collaborative methodological stance (Abu-Lughod 1988) in my work.

Much in the way that Babcock and Chandras (this section) analyze “mother tongue” as a technology of commensuration, the category of HL functions to construct equivalences among and within otherwise disparate histories, languages, and domains of their use. As components in large-scale, modernist formations, heritage and ethnicity have historically been used as markers to determine “mother tongue,” allowing the categories “mother tongue” and HL to operate similarly. That is, both create a link between a person’s individual identity, their ancestry, nation, and language abilities (Bonfiglio 2010). In this essay, I untangle

when HL and “mother tongue” can be used synonymously and when they are distinct, most notably when the connection to the language is one external to the familial domain (e.g., religion).

2 | Kinship

My *nani*, maternal grandmother, is a Hindi author and journalist and would always make up stories to entertain me when I was a child. I constantly begged for more tales, and she always obliged. Despite her background in the Hindi literary scene, Nani’s stories for me, and our conversations, were always in English. I never felt this affected our relationship until I heard Nani use Kumaoni terms (the regional dialect of my maternal family and her “mother tongue”), such as “*ija mere*” (oh, my mother). I started collecting a list of such terms to sprinkle in conversation to make me feel more connected to Nani, but our main language of communication remains English. My own experience using language to navigate kin relations found various resonances across the narratives that Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) and Heritage Language Course (HLC) instructors shared during my research. Relationships with family members, such as grandparents, were often voiced as a strong motivator in HLLs’ decisions to learn their “mother tongue.” Every student talked about this special relationship: one that allows grandchildren to begin to piece together a sense of family history and culture.

One student I spoke with about this is Saana. We met through the South Asian Students Association and built a strong friendship while taking a South Asian history class together. Saana is a fourth-year undergraduate and second-generation Indian American citizen who grew up speaking a mix of English and her HL (Urdu) in the home. In her HLC, Saana learned how to read Urdu, and as she described it, learning how to read Urdu opened a whole new realm of communication with her grandparents. Saana described how her grandfather was reluctant to communicate with her in English but now sends her texts in the Urdu script and seems “a lot more comfortable and a lot more expressive when it’s in Urdu instead of English ... and it makes him super excited, which is sweet.” In Saana’s narrative, this resulted in a new sense of immediacy: Learning her HL formally in class helped her to feel confident in speaking to her grandparents and no longer need her parents’ mediation to instruct her or guide the conversation, allowing her to form her own relationship with her grandparents.

As a result of kinship being expressed as a source of HLL motivation, professors work to foster this in their curricula. Professor Yaskiv, a professor of Russian language, described how she designs her learning environment to build a connection between students and their families. She said her syllabus includes interaction with relatives, for instance, an activity where students interview a family member. She also told me that in Russia students often memorize and perform classic poems, so her students do the same because those who were educated in Russia place a high value on the experience of memorizing poems. She facilitates this experience for her heritage students to allow them to have a common experience with their families and their heritage via language.

3 | Literacy

During the summer of 2020, I downloaded the Duolingo app for Hindi learning but ended up frustrated and quit. My frustration stemmed from confronting the gaps in my knowledge of my “mother tongue.” I felt that I was perfectly conversational in Hindi and able to understand when spoken to, so facing my illiteracy was challenging, given my presumption that proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking was necessary for me to claim its “mother tongue” status. Trying to gain skills in literacy on a program like Duolingo, which is designed for a non-HLL population, felt like it negated all the Hindi I already understood orally. At this time, I was not aware of the existence of HLCs and how they could mitigate the discrepancy between my oral and literate language skills in a way that validated my understanding of my “mother tongue.” This experience was thus an important part of what motivated me to register to take the Arabic course since I was already literate in the Arabic script.

Other students to whom I spoke during my research shared similar experiences. Kaisha, a first-year undergraduate and third-generation Bengali American, explained how her grandparents would often tell her it was such a shame they never taught her how to read or write. However, following her HL course, she described showing her grandparents that she can now “read the Bengali newspapers and also the news on the TV screen.” Vibha, a fourth-year undergraduate and first-generation Indian American citizen who took the Tamil HLC, also elaborated on her changing media and linguistic proficiencies, recounting an anecdote involving her paternal grandmother, where one night, “I sat next to her and was reading a Tamil magazine with her, and the joy on our faces when we both realized I could read this magazine.” Vibha told me she saw her parents’ faces from the living room, which she felt expressed a “subtle pride” in her.

4 | Religion

Every night before I went to sleep, Ba (my father) made me recite *Kalma Tayyab* (an Islamic creed) in Arabic, which reaffirms one’s faith in Islam, specifically by pronouncing that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. As a child, I spoke this out of rote habit, but I began to see the Arabic language as part of my everyday life. Eventually, as I turned away from the religion, I still considered and wanted Arabic to be an intimate part of my linguistic experience and hoped to learn the language from a social perspective. At the beginning of my thesis research, I questioned what it would mean for a person to have a relationship with a language that started from the place of religion and eventually move into a cultural context.

In the masjid, I was always in the men’s section with Ba wearing a poorly tied hot-pink hijab. During car rides, Ba made me practice reciting all my surahs (chapters of the Quran); I had a good memory and could repeat the words back, but I never understood what I was saying. When I was older, we would sit at the dining table before bed so I could read a page of the Quran in Arabic. Religion, for me, was isolating, but Ba told me he does not see the need for an Islamic community; his relationship with Allah is one-on-one. When we fought, Ba thought it was because I was ashamed of being Muslim, especially with the post-9/11

Islamophobia, but for me, I just didn’t *believe*. At the same time, Islam is inextricable from my life—take, for instance, my name.

My mom is not a practicing Hindu, but I grew up reading Hindu folktales, and we celebrated Hindu holidays at home. As I reflect on it now, I saw as a child how religion could be cultural without needing to also be something that one “believed,” and that language is a crucial means to connect to that culture. As I took the Arabic HLC, I wanted to separate my relationship with the Arabic language from religion and instead create a narrative for myself where Arabic was connected to culture, separate from religion. In class, I learned words for cultural practices, such as saying “*daayme*” (may God always provide food) to the host at the end of the meal, to which they respond by saying “*sahteen*” (may it give you health). We also studied terms I had only ever experienced in a religious context as part of a social context, like “*ramadan mbaarak*” (Happy Ramadan), which I had heard growing up, but I never knew the proper response, which is “*Aaleena w’ aaleek*” (and you too). These lessons became a way for me to untangle Islam from the Arabic language.

I met Hadia in high school, so when I invited her to participate in my research, she was excited to reconnect over our shared experience. During our Zoom conversation, we discussed how, despite running miles together during several cross-country and track seasons and having intimate conversations on these runs, our heritage never came up. Hadia, a first-generation Egyptian American citizen, is now a fourth-year undergraduate. She told me about how difficult it was to find places to speak Arabic growing up and about the complicated relationship between Islam and Arabic; for her, the two are heavily interconnected, and she talked about learning Arabic post-9/11. In car rides to New York, she and her brother would take Arabic books and practice their writing, but once they parked, they had to be sure to flip their books upside down so no one could see the Arabic script and think it was “a car bomb or something.” While Hadia said this was never something she was embarrassed about, she was still aware of the way “her language” was viewed. Hadia’s narrative shows how learning Arabic in the US post-9/11, although she was a non-Muslim Arab, she experienced the feeling of knowing her HL was rooted in both Islam and Islamophobia.

Now in college, Hadia stated that she has a much larger Arab community but noted, “several of my friends that are not Arab are Muslim, so I think there’s sort of a connection.” She uses Arabic phrases like *mashallah* (God has willed it) or *inshallah* (God willing) in conversation and feels it is a part of her culture as well. In this way, Hadia points out how language and culture can be related to religion for a person, even if they themselves are not part of that religious community. While scholars note that “a basic understanding of Islam is essential to understanding Arab cultures” (Husen 2011, 32), religion is only one of the many aspects of culture.

I met Vibha, another student, during our introductory biology courses, and we became fast friends. During college, we started celebrating Hindu holidays and cooking Indian food together. Alongside taking the Tamil HLC, Vibha also chose to take the Hindi HLC. Vibha’s family is from India, where Hindi is the official national language, but Tamil is her family’s regional dialect, or vernacular. For children of immigrants, like Vibha, she

told me how this allowed her to build different relationships with each of the languages. She hoped to learn Tamil to speak with her family, and she hoped learning Hindi would help her become more integrated with an expanded Indian community, such as at her temple. For instance, during a service at her temple, she was able to read the sacred books because Hindi shares the Sanskrit script.

In my interactions with students, I observed that HL and “mother tongue” diverged most notably in the context of organized religion. Over Thanksgiving break in 2021, I sat down for a Zoom interview with Kaisha. We had only communicated via email since I had reached out to students enrolled in HLCs, so it was nice to see her face and get a glimpse into her room, which was scattered with artwork. She told me about her relationship to Arabic and Bengali as we talked about our shared experiences growing up as Muslim Americans. Kaisha understands Arabic only in the context of praying as a Muslim but otherwise considers her “mother tongue” to be Bengali. She told me about hearing the *maulana*, an Islamic religious leader, speak to people in Bengali and described it as “really cool that the person giving religious guidance is speaking in these people’s mother tongue,” which makes religion more “personal” because, in Kaisha’s words, “their mother tongue is part of their religion.” I, on the other hand, had a different experience, where Hindi—my self-identified “mother tongue”—never entered the Islamic sphere. I built a different relationship with Arabic, as it was only used in the context of religion, and because of this, I, for years, considered it a HL, distinct from my “mother tongue.”

Because Hindi holds official language status in India, my parents shared that national connection to the language. I remember not thinking much of this until my *dada* (paternal grandfather) corrected me and said, “Urdu is our language, not Hindi.” I was curious about this and took a class in college on the Hindi-Urdu controversy, which validated my understanding that though the languages are orally indistinguishable, because Urdu is derived from the Arabic script (script of Islamic texts), there was a Hindu nationalist push during the rising religious tensions prepartition to change the government and court language from Urdu to Hindi, where the script is derived from Sanskrit (script of Hindu texts). Though there are subtle differences between Hindi and Urdu, my parents steered clear of this complexity and were united in telling me that we spoke Hindi at home. I remember one funny miscommunication arose when I was sick and my parents were using different words for “vomit,” but they quickly agreed on which word to use, unifying our “home language” (Adams and Tulasiewicz 2005, 6).

Learning about how the history of Hindi in India is inextricably linked to Hindu nationalist movements. I came to see it as not just my “mother tongue” but also connected to Hinduism. While I now understand that Urdu is a language predominantly used by several South Asian Muslim communities, for me, Arabic was the language of Islam, and I think this is because Ba insisted we take Arabic lessons from a young age and read and recite the Quran in Arabic instead of Urdu. I never saw Hindi (or Urdu) being used in Islam and therefore never linked my “mother tongue” with Islam.

5 | Commensurating (With) “Mother Tongue” and HL

Terms like “mother tongue” and HL are shortcuts, enabling people to make sense of their relationships to and through language without reckoning rigorously with the complex, fluid, and contextual histories behind either the terms or their own relationships to a given language. Yet as I found for myself, and as my research interlocutors repeatedly showed, terms obscure as much as they reveal. As I have noticed, the terms sometimes come together easily, but other times seem rigidly opposed. I found that the terminology suggests not different things, but different imagined entryways to the language being studied. Though the ultimate goal may be the same for all students to participate in the “shared, objective world” of culture via a specific language (Keane 2007, 65), learners who describe a language as their “mother tongue” are specifically motivated to interact with the language through bonds of kinship in addition to participating in domains external to the family, whereas Heritage Learners are institutionally restricted to domains external to the family.

Ideologies of “mother tongue” have a long history of being rooted in the family. In European societies, the assumption was that the mother passed her language on to her children, leading to the term “*lingua materna*” in Medieval Latin (Adams and Tulasiewicz 2005, 4). Bonfiglio similarly describes the term “mother tongue” as being from “*droit de sang*” (Bonfiglio 2010, 13), where language is a native birthright and direct link to kin. This language is as related to the speaker as a child is to a mother. I think HL, on the other hand, is rooted in a historical relationship between language and speaker.

More recently, as categories, HLC and HLL emerged in response to American militarization and “can be regarded as a systematic effort” in response to the rise of “national and international crisis” (Van Deusen-Scholl 2003, 214). Language competency in the contemporary United States has been promoted by the state and adjacent institutions (including universities) from a strategic lens. For instance, there was a rise in Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto learning post-9/11 (as promoted, in universities, through the funding of area studies centers). In her meta-analysis of scholarly definitions of “heritage language learner,” Van Deusen-Scholl (2003, 221) ultimately settles on the claim that “heritage language learners comprise a heterogeneous group ranging from fluent native speakers to nonspeakers who may be generations removed, but who may feel culturally connected to a language.”

Scholars focused on the United States (Rosa and Flores 2017; García and Solorza 2021) have observed HL learning through the lens of bilingual language learning. García and Solorza (2021, 9) write that “the growth of ‘Spanish as a Heritage Language’ classes is also often an effort to eliminate bilingual practices and sanitize a language that is now assigned as ‘heritage’ ... [preventing] Latinx students from owning their own language practices and takes away their privilege as ‘native’ speakers.” In cases like these, HL learning involves students already having “native” functionality of a language, but the category also includes students like me: those without fluency of the language prior to entering the language classes.

This context of emergence was a starting point, but the institutions and ideologies it put in place have proliferated and expanded. Wendy Klein (2013) and Webb Keane (2007) both note that habitual, repetitive language practices allow a person to build a connection to the content they are reciting, whether that is the Pledge of Allegiance, building on US citizenship, or a religious creed. Beyond a connection to the content, they show how this also creates a connection to the language. While the question of connection to English comes up, in the contexts I studied, English is the dominant language of education and culture, not an additional language students learn via college courses. English thus occupies an ideologically exempted status as neither a HL nor “mother tongue” despite potentially fitting the definitions I and other scholars have developed. As Klein (2013, 46) discusses these repetitive linguistic practices among Punjabi-Sikhs, it is impossible to untangle religion from ethnicity. However, other experiences are also possible, as my own example shows. As an Indian American with both Muslim and Hindu heritage, ethnicity and religion have become linguistically and experientially separable for me. This motivated my decision to track “mother tongue” and HL as two separate terms.

As I think about it, the tensions felt between the categories HL and “mother tongue” emerge when a speaker feels contradictions institutionally or interpersonally between the usages of the terms and what they indicate for their experience of the language. Adams and Tulasiewicz (2005, 7) write that “mother tongue” is a private language that can also be called “home language,” which is mainly oral in character, localized to domestic settings, and distinct from official languages designated with national status. Beyond domestic registers, I think that “mother tongue” is a connection to language that transcends linguistic usage or register and is instead based upon kinship. In my observations, children who grew up learning their HL in the home are familiar with the household linguistic register (e.g., being asked to put toys away), but as they wished to move beyond the domestic register and communicate with their family members more fully, they experienced what scholars refer to as “language shyness” (Krashen 1998, 41) and “linguistic insecurity” (González 2001, 176). Learning their “mother tongue” in class allows speakers to feel more confident in their linguistic practices, and as I’ve described above, allows them to form stronger linguistic relationships with their family members. I think of “mother tongue” as extending to all linguistic domains and being rooted in kinship, whereas HL can be rooted in a localized linguistic domain (e.g., religion) or some other external, personal connection.

As I’ve thought about the relationships a person can have with language, competency certainly comes to mind. Nike Pokorn (2005, 4) writes that competency and function could be ways to discriminate against indigenous minorities or those denied rights to use and develop their “mother tongue.” Nielsen (this section) and Loh (this section) also explore issues of aspiration and attributed “deficiency” among speakers of non-heritage varieties. Similarly to Pokorn, Javier Domingo (2021) also comments on language fluency. While observing the Tehuelche community, Domingo notes that fluency is not a marker of authenticity, because linguists, despite their competence, “could not possibly have any claim to the language” (134). Claim to a language comes from nostalgia socialization, where a person makes sense of their personal history and projects that into the future (134). Domingo

writes that these histories are guided by family biographies, rendering the connection between language and kinship “so explicit that it needs no further comment” (135).

I observed that students use literacy as a skill to foster familial relationships by being able to participate in activities with their family, such as watching TV or reading the news with their grandparents. However, I saw that students without a familial connection to the language use literacy to connect with their religion or otherwise broader, self-identified communities through news and media consumption. As noted by Klein and Keane earlier, building language practices and competency allows students to deepen their connection to the language. As I’ve pointed out, whether the speaker feels the language they are speaking is their “mother tongue” or HL depends on the context in which the learner chooses to use their newly developed literacy and language skills and the starting place for their exposure to the language.

As students expressed language learning for the sake of forming familial relationships, I began to see the way that HL and “mother tongue” can be used interchangeably and synonymously. Despite the history of HL courses like the ones that my interviewees and I took, because students were motivated to learn the language to connect with their families, the course became a space for “mother tongue” learning. Because students’ motivations for learning were linked to kinship, in the university context, HL learning gets marketed as equivalent to “mother tongue” learning, even if it was not felt or narrated consistently in this way for learners themselves.

6 | Becoming a Vulnerable Observer

As a heritage learner myself, I draw inspiration from Lila Abu-Lughod (1988, 153), who describes how her experience as the daughter of an Arab family working in a Bedouin community allowed her to collaborate because she did not start with the presumption of a foundational, unbridgeable difference between researcher/anthropologist and other. I shared my own experience of being a heritage learner with the students and professors I spoke with during my research, all of whom were also heritage learners or professors of HL courses. By accounting for my own place in my work, I seek to build a more intimate relationship with my interlocutors and my writing, becoming what Ruth Behar (1997, 16) calls a *vulnerable observer*: inviting readers to see themselves “in the observer who is serving as their guide.” My own language learning experiences shaped my understanding of the constructed distinction between “mother tongue” and HL as categories through which I and research collaborators have navigated and narrated notions of kinship, literacy, and religion, but it has also shaped how I write.

The terms HL and “mother tongue” often diverged, with the former often invoked as an external, institutional frame for language learning that nevertheless allows for a personal and emotional connection to the language, and the latter invoked to point to a relationship to a language built on bloodline and kinship. Learners’ experiences influence our understanding of the terms HL and “mother tongue” and the tensions and similarities between the two terms. While college classrooms are often spaces

where language is taught via ideologies of competency and formal linguistic standards, the students I interviewed also reflected on HLLs as safe and welcoming spaces where they feel appreciated and valued for their participation, emphasizing the importance of these courses and the possibilities they opened for students to connect to their heritage or kin through language learning. In other words, despite institutional barriers, these courses still allowed students like me and my research collaborators to feel validated in having a relationship with the language.

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