
Book Reviews

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Rama Kant Agnihotri, Mahendra Kishore Verma and Vandana Puri (Eds.), *Language and Identity: Selected Papers of Robert B. Le Page*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2020, lxx+630 pages, ₹1,850. ISBN: 9789352879915 (Hardcover).

This book is a labour of love. Students of Robert Le Page have compiled and edited a selection of the writings of their inspiring teacher. Le Page (1920–2006) had a long and productive life—he lived and worked in the UK, Jamaica and Malaya, and left his stamp on the study of language and society at all these places. Even these ‘selected’ essays run to a good 630 pages. Preceded by a substantial 24-page interview, this makes the volume a fine introduction to the range of Le Page’s scholarship.

That range is captured well in the four sections that the book is divided into. The first section, ‘Theoretical Aspects’ examines Le Page’s ideas in nine essays on what language is, his sociolinguistic orientation, especially with regard to pidgins and creoles. The second section, ‘Pidgin and Creole Studies’ contains five of his seminal contributions to this field. This is followed by five essays in a ‘General’ section which treats a variety of topics from linguistic myths to language and race. A final fourth section has a self-explanatory title, ‘National Language and Identity’, and deals with this theme in three essays. This review briefly visits each of these sections.

‘What is a Language?’ The answer to this question in the first section begins with a manifesto-like four-point list. The first point gives a flavour of the rest: ‘the concept of a closed and finite rule-system is inadequate for the description of natural languages’ (p. 82). This concept, Le Page argues later, ‘belongs to a world of stereotypes about language which are usually politically or ideologically motivated’ (p. 85), and these stereotypes have consequences for teacher training—‘effective teaching across the curriculum by an understanding of how language works for the individual and for society’ (p. 85). The political ideology that these stereotypes encourage should be all too familiar to us here in India:

1. that it is essential to impose national unity through the sole recognition of a homogeneous national language.
2. that the precise form of that language—the rule system, its grammar, vocabulary and orthography—can be legislated for.
3. that its homogenous use can be achieved through the education system. (p. 86)

Section 4 is precisely about this political ideology, that ‘Nationalism is a matter of forming a club. Language is one of the more important criteria for membership’ (p. 617). The 80-page essay, ‘The National Language Question’ is subtitled, ‘Linguistic Problems of Newly Independent States’ (p. 519). Indeed, these are the themes that animate all the essays in this book (inevitably, for a book of this kind, the themes recur throughout). For instance, he observes that in the Indian context, ‘There are many examples of linguistic systems which have only become discrete when different orthographies were devised for them; Hindi and Urdu are the best known examples’ (p. 97). The essay gives a wide range of similar examples from across the world and ends with a framework of six ‘factors’ that drive the national language question. The essay ends by cautioning us: ‘Each of the above factors is a variable, and in no two countries is the situation exactly similar. No universal solution of the national language question, therefore, exists’ (p. 593).

The essays on ‘Pidgin and Creole Studies’ in the second section keep returning to the idea of the ‘multilingual sociolinguistic space’ which are ‘the effects of both individual and communal acts of identity’ (p. 289). Through a series of close studies of the language behaviour of speakers—‘the sole locus of language is the individual’ (p. 413)—Le Page explores repeatedly the idea of language standardisation and what it means for the speakers’ self and reflected identities. In another essay in this section, there are subsections on ‘What Can Teachers Do?’, ‘Learning to Read and Write’, and ‘Education for Living in a Multicultural Society’ (pp. 391–398). These too are themes of particular relevance in our multilingual India, where processes of language standardisation disempower many children in the school education system.

Not surprisingly, Le Page is deeply concerned about the exclusionary nature of this multilingualism, which comes out clearly in ‘The Standardisation of Languages and the Vernacularisation of Literacy’, the third section of the book. ‘Tolerance...towards non-standard dialects or modes of expression is rare, and the teachers are not able to do anything very much except to try to cram their pupils into the standard mould’ (p. 456). It is for this reason that he campaigned in the West Indies ‘for a local Examinations Board to replace Cambridge and London, and to

train... West Indians who might one day have influence themselves as teachers or trainers of teachers' (p. 457). As he notes, 'Among our first batch of students was a young man, Derek Walcott, whom today I am not alone in regarding as one of the finest poets writing in English' (p. 450). An excerpt from Walcott's early play, *The Sea at Dauphin* follows, which 'shows him struggling to develop a stage version of the vernacular of this native island, St. Lucia, which would nevertheless be intelligible to a wider audience' (pp. 450–451).

Indeed, an initial puzzle for readers who might open the book at random might be the wealth of references to literature and literary figures—from classical Greek and Latin through the Renaissance to the Moderns. One hint emerges early in Agnihotri's introduction to the book, where we learn that Le Page read English at Oxford, and that his doctoral thesis was on *Studies in Early English Prosody* (p. xi). Here then is a linguist trained in literature as well. Although 'literature' does not even appear in the index, Le Page thinks of himself as a literature man (p. xxxii). Some pages later, in the interview with two of the editors, Agnihotri and Verma, Le Page says,

'you can bring insights into the nature of language from the study of poetry and prose, which without those insights, you become, I think too mechanistic and then...and that is a pity.... I always look back in gratitude to Tolkien because, to me, he brought these two traditions together' (p. lxxv).

The ellipses in that quote are a device that the editors use to capture the ebb and flow, and the hesitations and changes in choice of phrasing that the interlocutors used—an interesting device to give a sense of the immediacy of a conversation. That interview, rightly placed at the beginning of the book, frames Le Page, his background and the evolution of his concerns and projects. A couple of illustrative quotes help to locate him in his social and ideological context:

'Coming from a very poor background in London, looking at kids coming from a very poor background in the West Indies, feeling they ought to have had the chance that I had, and my chance being provided by good teachers and scholarships and so on, why should not they have the same kind of chance?' (p. lvii).

Here is another: 'For me, education is an enabling process—to enable people to do what they themselves want to do and if they want to read and write, if they think it's going to be to their advantage to read and write' (p. lii).

Long as the book is, it would have been useful for researchers to have a consolidated, annotated bibliography of the works of a scholar as diverse and productive as Le Page. One also feels that more diligent proofreading of the text should have been done to avoid several obvious typos. The design and production values of the book are uneven. In my copy, the binding is poor; the last section is already detaching itself. On the other hand, Swarna Jana's cover design, and the use of that motif between chapters, are decisions that work well.

What makes this book special, though, is this selection from the writings of Robert Le Page. A deep and abiding concern towards social justice and inclusion, a celebration of language variation and linguistic diversity, and a strong belief in the fluidity of languages and language boundaries are woven throughout the narrative of the book. All these concerns are immensely important to students of language in India as they relate directly to classroom practices, framing of curricula, teacher training and national language policies.

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**Anup Dhar, Tejaswini Niranjana and K. Sridhar (Eds.),
Breaking the Silo: Integrated Science Education in India.
Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2017, xli+282 pages, ₹1,050.
ISBN: 9789386392886 (Hardback).**

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The idea of teaching science as an integrated subject appeals to education stakeholders across the board. There is no distinction made among subjects such as biology, chemistry or physics in secondary school science textbooks anymore. For a short period, the NCERT was producing secondary science books with the title 'Integrated Science' and teacher education colleges across the country had 'Pedagogy of Integrated Science' as a course component. However, the editors of this book have a different kind of integration in mind. First, they are documenting an experiment undertaken in teaching science in an